



NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Longue Vue House and Gardens

Mute Victims of Katrina: Four Louisiana Landscapes at Risk



Longue Vue House and Gardens is an internationally recognized historic house museum and gardens that has provided unique and vital resources to the greater New Orleans community for the past 25 years. Longue Vue's magnificent grounds are a product of the Country Place Era that flourished from the 1890s until the Great Depression.. Longue Vue was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 2005, accredited by the American Association of Museums in 1986 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991. The Longue Vue property is collaborative tour-de-force, combining the landscape and interiors of landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman , the architectural genius of William and Geoffrey Platt, and the horticultural knowledge of Caroline Dormon. The house is an extraordinary example of the Classical Revival style and one of the last great houses of the American Architectural Renaissance. Longue Vue is considered to be the master residential work of William and Geoffrey Platt and the masterwork of Ellen Biddle Shipman—once called “the dean of American women in landscape architecture.”

HISTORY

Edgar and Edith Stern married in June 1921. During their engagement (as Mrs. Stern recalled in a 1978 interview), she and Mr. Stern were dining at the New Orleans Country Club, and he asked where she wanted to live. She gestured vaguely in the direction of present day Longue Vue. The area was undeveloped and unfashionable at the time (near the cemeteries, but not



much else), and there were only about five houses as far as one could see. Thus they decided to purchase a property on Metairie Ridge, a ten-minute drive from New Orleans' historic French Quarter. They chose a well-sited parcel bordered a prominent golf course, protecting the site from adjacent developments and providing the opportunity for long vistas. Also, the 17th Street Canal bordered the small neighborhood on the west, and the Palmetto Canal bordered it on the south. Together, these canals provided drainage and protected the area from adjacent developments. On their property, in 1923, the Sterns built a Colonial Revival house, designed by New Orleans architect Moise Goldstein. The Sterns also purchased adjacent land parcels to enlarge their estate: the Longue Vue property did not encompass all eight acres until the late 1930s.

When the Sterns decided to hire a landscape architect to work on Longue Vue's gardens, they chose Ellen Biddle Shipman, whom they met through a friend who owned a Shipman-designed garden. Mrs. Stern also was a member of a local Garden Study Club for which Shipman had designed a local public garden. The Sterns hired Shipman in 1935, beginning what would become a 15-year collaboration that lasted until Shipman's death in 1950.

Shipman's influence on Longue Vue went well beyond the design of its gardens. The Sterns named Shipman "Lady Ellen" and described her as the "godmother" of Longue Vue. She made at least two annual visits to Longue Vue per year to work on planting plans and to resolve maintenance issues with variety of head gardeners.

Shown on a 1936 site plan, Shipman's earliest work at Longue Vue included the Goldfish Pond and Overlook (1935); the Sunken Garden or South Lawn (including the a 1920s Temple which she tied to the house via the walled Camellia Allee); a rose garden (now the site of the Walled Garden); and a small terrace with a Pan Statue. Shipman also designed a south terrace garden (now the site of present house).

After Shipman had worked on their gardens, the Sterns realized that their house was not oriented to the garden and they could not enjoy the views from the house. They also decided that they wanted a house and garden in the villa tradition established by Shipman's friend and mentor, Charles Platt. Unfortunately, Platt had died in 1933. After a failed attempt to work with famed architect David Adler, the Sterns consulted "Lady Ellen", on whose advice they hired Platt's successor run by Charles' sons, the New York-based architects William and Geoffrey Platt.

Given the close relationship and shared visions of Shipman, the Platt brothers and the Sterns, Longue Vue presents a holistic design approach that is rarely achieved in design. William became the primary designer for the Sterns' new home; however, Geoffrey's contributions are evident. Correspondence documents that Shipman also worked on the interiors with the Platt brothers, creating room maquettes and (in consultation with the Platts and the Sterns) choosing the furnishings and decorative schemes.

Ultimately, Shipman and the Platts create a house and garden setting that was comfortable and aesthetically pleasing: Longue Vue was both a home refuge and a seat of entertainment for the Sterns' many philanthropic efforts. In all ways, the new house was Shipman's masterpiece as well as William Platt's. In fact, after Shipman died in 1950, William Platt became the main consultant for all decisions from garden cushions to major changes in the gardens.

In true villa style, the gardens and the architecture both now followed a single cohesive plan. By 1942, the site plan showed an Arrivals court, Oak Allee, Forecourt, Azalea Walk, Pan Garden on the east side, of the House, East Terrace, Portico Garden (knot garden), Camellia Allee, Walled Garden, Wild Garden and Nursery area. No further changes occurred until 1952 when the Temple was replaced by a Loggia. In the 1960s, William Platt created several gardens for Mrs. Stern that reflected the region's Spanish heritage, as well as the Yellow Garden. Visitor (now staff) parking was installed in the 1970s: Mrs. Stern designed its Op art paving pattern. In 1999, the Lucy C. Roussel Children's Discovery Garden opened in the old nursery area to promote children's education; however, the Metropolitan Greenhouse and Lath House, which date to the



Shipman era, were retained.

During the mid-'60s, a few years after Edgar Stern's death, Mrs. Stern actively sought to secure the future stewardship of Longue Vue and to provide long-term public access. Thus she established Longue Vue Foundation in 1965 educational purposes. It supported the Longue Vue Gardens, which opened in 1968 on a limited basis while she lived in the house. In 1978, Mrs. Stern moved from her home into the Pontchartrain Hotel: under an agreement with the New Orleans Museum of Art, the house itself opened to the public in 1980. In January 1, 2004, the Longue Vue Foundation and Longue Vue House & Gardens Boards merged. Today, this Board retains total ownership over all of Longue Vue's assets and holds complete decision making authority, serving as both trustees and operating board.

As a National Historic Landmark, Longue Vue is deemed both to retain a high degree of design and to possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States. Today, fewer than 2,500 historic places bear this national distinction: only 3% of properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places are designated as National Historic Landmarks -- a designation only the United States Congress can confer. Thus the nation recognizes that Longue Vue is a living part of our national heritage and an irreplaceable legacy to future generations.

THE THREAT

As was noted above, Longue Vue is located very close to the Palmetto Canal, which was slightly overtopped during Hurricane Katrina. Water came into the Pine Drive, Entrance Court and Oak alley, flooding the basements of three buildings near the entrance court: this water came up from the drains. Fortunately, no water was in the Longue Vue house itself. Water also filled the below-grade fountain pump room and ruined all the mechanical systems for Longue Vue's air conditioning, wiring and fountains (each of Longue Vue's gardens includes a fountain). Flooding also killed many historic magnolia trees. Fortunately, the main house and its two dependencies and the Casino or Playhouse sit on slightly higher ground, so that adjacent magnolias appear to have survived.

All told, the gardens suffered extensive damage - all the more devastating given that Longue Vue had just completed a thorough decade-long restoration of the gardens. Floodwater casualties included approximately two-thirds of the plantings (and all the seasonal plantings); large trees such as pines and Southern magnolias; camellias and azaleas; over 800 of the boxwood from the parterres; and much of the ground cover. Plants that were not killed immediately (including the Live Oaks in the Oak Allee) were exposed to winds and brackish water that caused trauma and that eventually may cause death.

Longue Vue's insurance is inadequate to fully cover this damage. The gardens were seriously underinsured, with only \$200,000 in garden insurance. The cost of post-Hurricane Katrina tree conservation alone is \$150,00. The anticipated cost to (again) restore the gardens is at least \$1,000,000, including plant replacement, fountains and "hardscape" repair. In addition, Longue Vue's garden staff has been reduced from 4 full-time (FTE) employees to 2.5 FTE: the head gardener plus one part-time and one full-time gardener. While the site intends to rebuild its garden staff, it is difficult at this time to find employees with the appropriate skills.

To preserve this threatened National Landmark, Longue Vue's staff must amend soil, remove debris, replant, engage in conservation and maintenance practices for those trees and plants that remain, and adhere to the stringent stewardship practices that support the property's National Historic Landmark designation. In addition, they must continue to educate people about the importance of historic gardens and the need for the preservation, as they have found that education is the key to community commitment and support.

On the (very) positive side, Longue Vue has approximately 1,000 members, receives financial support from both local and national individuals and foundations, and (in Hurricane-free times) receives over 42,000 visitors annually including school groups, community



members and visitors who come to experience local history as well as beauty and tranquility. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast region, the support from gardens, arboreta, museums, conservationists, and laypersons was overwhelming and uplifting. The staff received emails from people, all over the world, who had visited Longue Vue, and were concerned about its condition. With the assistance of AABGA, Longue Vue received the volunteer support of the following gardens and arboreta:

- Holden Arboretum
- Smithsonian Institution
- Atlanta Botanical Garden
- Chanticleer Garden
- Albuquerque Botanical Park
- Garden Conservancy group (consisting of experts from a variety of gardens)
- Bayou Bend

Longue Vue also received assistance from individuals, historic sites and garden groups including:

- Patricia M. O'Donnell, FASLA, AICP , FASLA
- Dr. Neal Odenwald
- Jane Roy Brown
- Geoffrey Platt
- Judith Tankard
- Better Homes and Gardens
- Charleston Historical Society
- Middleton Place
- Richmond Heights Garden Club
- Historical Society for the Town of Greenwich

This list does not include the numerous individuals who show up every week to assist in the clean-up and replanting. Nor does it include the many individuals who have donated funds through the Longue Vue website.

On the (very) negative side, Longue Vue does not anticipate substantial direct or indirect revenues through 2006. And, despite efforts to significantly reduce spending, Longue Vue must retain staff, maintain utilities, pay for materials, and fund its communications with the public as Longue Vue joins with the larger community to rebuild New Orleans.

HOW TO HELP

Here are a few ways that the public can help to preserve and rebuild Longue Vue's gardens:



- Come to New Orleans and help Longue Vue to replant.
- With only one garden staff member on site at this time, “people power” is greatly needed! Continuity, history and commitment are essential for stability. Amidst the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, visitors will still find serenity, beauty and inspiration. Where better to find peace of mind than in the lovely setting of Longue Vue’s gardens?
- Underwrite the salary of a gardener for one year.
- This would help both our gardens and our operating budget! The yearly cost to employ a gardener is \$30,000, including benefits.
- Donate funds to purchase plants and garden materials, repair hardscape, and rebuild our fountain pump system. You can purchase plants for Longue Vue from an extensive list on their website.
- Educate, educate, educate everyone you know about Longue Vue’s historic gardens and encourage them to visit Longue Vue’s website.

Further Reading

Tankard, Judith B. *The Gardens of Ellen Biddle Shipman*. Sagaponack, NY: Sagapress, in association with the Library of American Landscape History, 1996.

Site Address

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