

Shaun Eyring

Judd Gardens Between Culture and Nature

Judd Gardens is a rare surviving example of an early-20th-century rustic cottage garden of the Appalachian Highlands. It is located on the northern edge of Skyland, a former 19th- and early-20th-century mountain resort just off the Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park. The design of Judd Gardens responded to natural land forms, used native materials such as wood, plants, and stone, and created views to important geological features like Stony Man Mountain. To this was added showy ornamental plants and popular exotics from around the world, an irrigation system, and organized planting beds that reflected the horticultural and design preferences of the era. For many years, Judd Gardens was a showplace that was an important part of the Skyland experience.

Abandoned in the early 1960s and overgrown by the late 1980s, this garden has generated extensive discussion from resource managers responsible for its upkeep. The 1983 General Management Plan for the park identifies protecting National Register eligible cultural resources as important; it also states that vegetation will continue to revert to native species through natural succession.¹ This conflict has created some confusion over how to manage Judd Gardens. First, the garden is a potentially significant cultural landscape. Because, however, it is overgrown and many of its features are decaying or gone, the question of whether it retains integrity has long been argued. Second, as a remnant cultural landscape in the process of being reclaimed by a natural landscape, it has nurtured opposing viewpoints over whether natural succession should simply continue. This article will describe the process that the park, assisted by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office, followed to resolve these issues. This included evaluating Judd Gardens according to National Register criteria and planning a management strategy for the garden that balanced park natural, cultural, and maintenance values.

Skyland Resort postcard c1930 showing landscape in early successional growth.



Historic Context

Judd Gardens was a project of the George H. Judd family that extended over many years, from the purchase of the property in 1910 until the death of George's wife, Marianna, in 1958. George H. Judd had been an early guest at Skyland, a resort community that George Pollock and his associates began developing in the mountains west of Warrington, Virginia, in 1887. This community served as a rural mountain retreat away from the summer heat and business life of Washington, DC, and other East Coast urban areas. Here, residents could become immersed in nature. This reflected a broader trend in the late-19th-century, and the Skyland example was mirrored at other inland sites such as the Catskills, Saratoga Springs, and Yellow Springs. The Judds and many of their neighbors at Skyland were part of an affluent Washington business community. Founders of several publishing companies, the Judds were most well-known as printers of *National Geographic*.²

George Judd purchased two lots on the northern edge of the Skyland community and, in 1910, commissioned Victor Mindeleff, a well-known Washington architect who perfected the cottage style, to design and supervise construction of Sentinel Lodge, the Judds' primary residence there. Over the next 11 years, Judd purchased several adjacent properties, including Tryst in the Winds cottage, Arrowhead cabin, and Double Eagle cabin. He also acquired acreage on what was called the "north view" lots. The Judds walled portions of this property and began creating what has come to be called Judd Gardens.³

The Judds, like many other cottage owners, developed their grounds within a rustic and picturesque landscape vocabulary. In the 1930s, Skyland—and all of the area now known as Shenandoah National Park—was in early stages of

successional growth. This openness facilitated the possibility of showy gardens dependent on sunlight to flourish; Skyland became known for its colorful and bountiful flowers. The Judds, however, developed a garden that was a unique blend of showy and naturalistic styles. The northern five-acre portion of the garden was considered virgin woods and was retained. Acres closer to the cottages reflected Mrs. Judd's love of ornamental plants and flowers, and this area was planted in a series of rock beds that appeared to develop as naturalistic gardens. A series of stone steps were built into the steep slopes that led to the Judd cottages.

In addition to extensive planting, native stone was used to build walls, and local wood was

Shenandoah National Park in 1936, his wife Marianna Judd was allowed to retain the use of the property until her death in 1958. It appears that she continued to garden in much the same manner that she had gardened in the years before her husband's death. Within two years of Mrs. Judd's death, Tryst of the Winds and Sentinel Lodge were removed and the maintenance of Judd Gardens ceased. By the late 1980s, the condition of the gardens confused park visitors looking for the gardens that were described in some early park brochures. Rather than finding a garden, they encountered an apparent wilderness.⁵ A closer look, however, revealed a garden framework within a flourishing botanical and horticultural legacy. Gone were the cottages that once looked out onto the garden, but stone walls and steps still divided the landscape and ascended its Appalachian slopes. Obscured views of Stony Man Mountain and open areas reflected the garden spaces of the Judd era. Plantings, both native and exotic, still flowered in designed combinations.

View northeast from Sentinel Lodge, c1930.



Right, view toward Stony Man Mountain, 1988. Photo courtesy Land and Community Associates.

formed into rustic garden furniture, fencing, and gates. Planting was used in a controlled way to create vistas of important geological features. At its peak, Judd Gardens was an important part of the Skyland experience. Located adjacent to the old Skyland road to Luray, it was the first camp feature encountered and guests would pass it en route to nearby bathing facilities and Stony Man Mountain.⁴

On August 5, 1928, George Judd died under a white pine in his garden. With the creation of



Evaluating the Garden According to National Register Criteria

The condition of the garden combined with a prevailing perception of Shenandoah National Park as a predominantly wilderness landscape led some managers to favor releasing the garden to natural succession; others believed the garden to be a critical, character-defining feature of a poten-

Judd Gardens below Sentinel Lodge showing stone walls and rock-pile flower gardens, 1938.



tial Skyland Historic District. This debate led to a formal evaluation of the garden. In 1988, Land and Community Associates of Charlottesville, Virginia, accomplished landscape architects and preservation planners, were hired to complete a cultural landscape report for the garden. The purpose of this project was two-fold: 1) to evaluate the garden according to National Register criteria and 2) to provide an appropriate management strategy based on the findings of the evaluation. This strategy could range from releasing the garden to restoring the garden to its former splendor.

Using an established process for evaluating cultural landscapes,⁶ Land and Community Associates (LCA) examined the garden methodically, looking at natural features, views and vistas, vegetation, structures, circulation, and small scale features. By analyzing these landscape characteristics, LCA discovered that much more of the garden was intact than met the eye. Original garden paths, views to key geological points, combined plantings of native and exotic species, stone walls and stairs, and garden furnishing remnants were all mapped and described. The vegetation was inventoried with the assistance of specialists from the National Arboretum in Washington, DC. Trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants were divided into classes. Class A plants were native species believed to pre-date or to be introduced by the Judd family. Class B plants were exotic plants believed to be introduced by the Judd family. Class C plants were those plants, native and exotic, believed to post-date the Judd family. This exercise revealed an underlying organization to the garden that was not immediately evident. The spacing and species of plant

material, the location of walls and steps, and the network of paths suggested that the garden consisted of many smaller rooms, each with its own character. Overall, results of research and field work indicated that there were seven garden "rooms" created between 1911 and 1922.

The character of these spaces ranged from a rock garden, to an open lawn, to a naturally forested area with paths for strolling.⁷

The question of historic integrity

plagued all of those who worked on the project. Looking at the garden individually, it was questionable whether there was enough material present to convey its significance as a rustic Appalachian garden. Looking at the garden within the context of Skyland as a whole, it was clear that the garden was a very important surviving piece of this rustic vacation resort. After much discussion and debate, LCA's recommendation was that the Judd Gardens within Skyland possessed historic significance and integrity for its association with the development of late-19th and early-20th-century outdoor recreation and resort communities in the United States.⁸ Therefore, the garden was considered a contributing resource to the potential Skyland Historic District.⁹



Creating a Management Plan

Once this recommendation had been made, LCA began, in conjunction with the park and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office, to develop a plan that would provide an effective and realistic management framework and would complement the park's resources and priorities. It was agreed that there should be some garden management, but a low cost, low intervention approach that respected the garden structure while incorporating maintenance and natural resources management concerns.

It was clear that the Judds worked hard to maintain a garden that was a unique blend of native landscape and pleasing exotic elements. But after 20 years of neglect, the balance at Judd Gardens had been upset. Once natural and cultural features combined to form the organization of this garden; now natural succession, erosion, and decay appeared to dominate. The fundamental principle guiding the management plan, therefore, was not to restore the garden but rather to retrieve some of the former balance between culture and nature. Within this preservation/rehabilitation concept, the following recommendations were made:

Stone wall and planting bed, 1995. Photo by the author.

View from old Skyland road to Judd Gardens, note Blue Spruces and stone wall, 1989. Photo courtesy Land and Community Associates.



- undertake a complete arboreal survey of all Class A and B plant materials throughout the garden;
- develop a cyclic pruning regime to Class A and B plants to remove deadwood and provide light to shaded understory plants;
- remove all fallen dead plant material;
- name tag all Class A and B plant material with a suitable, weather-resistant tag and key to basemaps;
- remove Class C vegetation as needed, with an eye for reestablishing the character of the garden rooms;
- inspect and evaluate all character-defining, constructed cultural landscape features such as stone walls, paths, timber fences, and rustic benches and stabilize in a manner consistent with their original construction; and
- develop cyclic maintenance regime once features are stabilized.

In conjunction with the maintenance and natural resources program in the park and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office, the following recommendations were made:

- remove all invasive exotics, even those introduced by the Judd family (including Japanese Knotweed and Oriental Bittersweet);
- monitor hemlocks for Woolly Adelgid;
- monitor oaks for Gypsy Moth; and
- monitor pines for Pine Bark Beetle.

Implementing a Plan

Through the National Park Service Cultural Cyclic Maintenance Program, the park received modest funding to begin this low intervention approach to reclaiming and maintaining the general character of the garden. In 1994, the Morris Arboretum and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office worked with the park to complete a historic vegetation inventory and maintenance plan. This plan provided a framework for maintaining key plantings within each of the garden rooms. Each tree and shrub associated with the Judd family was inventoried and evaluated. Recommendations were made for pruning, cabling, and pest management. These recommendations

were compiled into a report with each tree keyed to an AutoCAD basemap. During the summer of 1997, each of the trees and shrubs inventoried was tagged with numbers that corresponded to the basemaps. With funding available for fiscal year 1998, the park will begin to implement some of the recommendations from both the Historic Vegetation Inventory and the Cultural Landscape Report.

Summary

The Judd Gardens project has been a valuable exercise in clarifying where a designed garden fits within a park whose policies favor the natural landscape. The management plan for the garden represents a low impact approach that combines the need for preserving significant cultural resources with current environmental and maintenance values. A new kind of balance between culture and nature is being reached for Judd Gardens.

Notes

- ¹ *General Management Plan, Shenandoah National Park*. National Park Service, 1983, pp. 62, 66.
- ² Land & Community Associates. *Judd Gardens Cultural Landscape Report*, 1993, pp.1-3.
- ³ *Ibid*, p. 18.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 21- 22.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 22- 23.
- ⁶ Land & Community Associates evaluated Judd Gardens using landscape characteristics described in National Register Bulletins #18 (*How to Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes*) and #30 (*Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Rural Historic Landscapes*).
- ⁷ Land & Community Associates, p. 21.
- ⁸ Land & Community Associates, p. 23.
- ⁹ The Skyline Drive National Historic District has recently been entered onto the National Register. It is expected that Skyland along with Judd Gardens, when the documentation is complete, will be included as part of this district.

Sources

- Birnbaum, Charles A, and Tallant, Sandra L., ed. *Balancing Natural and Cultural Issues in the Preservation of Historic Landscapes*, George Wright Society, 1996.
- Judd Gardens Historic Vegetation Inventory and Management Plan*, National Park Service, 1995.
- General Management Plan, Shenandoah National Park*. National Park Service, 1983.
- Land & Community Associates. *Judd Gardens Cultural Landscape Report*, 1993.
- Shaun Eyring is a historical landscape architect in the Philadelphia Support Office of the NPS Northeast Region.*

Morris Arboretum arborist, Bill Graham, examines a Class A tree in the Judd Gardens. Photo by the author.

