

## IT HAPPENS EVERY SPRING

*Writer Kathy Hudson chronicles the colorful history of Sherwood Gardens, from its rural beginnings to its mid-20th-century heyday to its rebirth in the 1980s.*

[ MID-1600S THROUGH 1924 ]

### Preparing the soil



On a 21st-century spring afternoon at Sherwood Gardens, people from all over Baltimore (as well as the occasional busload of out-of-state tourists) enjoy the profusion of tulips and azaleas. Though no sign says so, it's understood that the public is welcome.

But that wasn't the case originally. From the mid-1600s through the 1700s, this land of "gentle swells, which afford many beautiful views of the city and bay," as described in the booklet "Guilford and Sherwood Gardens," was held by 10 British colonists who were granted the property by the Crown. In 1822, it was sold as part of a 296-acre private estate to Gen. William McDonald,

who named it "Guilford" to commemorate the Revolutionary War battle of Guilford Court House, N.C., in which he was wounded.

After the good general died, his son Billy inherited Guilford and set about constructing the largest house ever built in Baltimore, an Italianate, 50-room mansion near the present northeast corner of Greenway and Lambeth Road. Billy also built a greenhouse, a graperly and a horse track that circled a marble fountain. Not one to skimp on his prize-winning racehorse, Flora Temple, aka "Queen of the Turf," he added an elaborate stable complete with apartment, reception room and boudoir for her. Such a bon vivant was Billy that he was said to ride his horses into the house during parties, some of which no doubt involved paddling on a boating lake made by diverted streams from nearby Stony Run.

After Billy's death, his widow and her new husband sold the estate to Arunah S. Abell, founding publisher of the Sunpapers. Then, in 1907, the Guilford Park Co. purchased the Abell estate for \$1 million. By 1911, the company had consolidated with the Roland Park Co., and in May 1913 "The Roland Park-Guilford District"— an easterly continuation of Roland Park featuring 1,000 acres, clean air and sanitary sewers— opened. Because of the war, few houses were built in the district immediately.

The boating lake was filled in and the 4.5-acre area was dubbed Stratford Green. Developers considered putting tennis courts or a casino there, but streams below made the soil too wet for building.

As it happened, the soggy soil was perfect for growing grass. Today the lush, green— and sometimes squishy— lawns of Sherwood Gardens thrive atop Billy McDonald's boating lake.

[ 1925 THROUGH 1945 ]

## Planting the seeds

It's lucky that petroleum pioneer, conservationist and art collector John W. Sherwood didn't get his wish to build a house in Roland Park. After the owner of the adjoining lot refused to sell, Sherwood bought five acres at 204 Highfield Road in Guilford in 1925. There he and his Virginia-bred wife, Mary Franklin, built a large Georgian house modeled after "Westover," the prominent Byrd family home on the James River.



Sherwood, a serious hobbyist gardener, began by planting around his house, but soon he expanded into Stratford Green to fill bare spots visible from his home. It wasn't long before the line between public park and private backyard blurred.

"One fine Sunday in May about 20 years ago I stepped off my back terrace and found myself surrounded by people, hundreds of them," Sherwood told *The National Geographic Magazine* in 1956. When his gardener asked if he should tell them to leave, Sherwood replied that the people were enjoying their gardens. Sensing a win-win situation, the Roland Park Co.— and later, its successor, the Guilford Association— gave its blessing to Sherwood's expanding efforts.

In the 1930s Sherwood and his gardener experimented with Darwin and Breeder tulips, multi-colored Rembrandt and lily-flower tulips from Holland and Cottage tulips from England. Just why Sherwood focused on tulips isn't clear, but perhaps it was because he wanted to enjoy a spring garden before he left to spend summers at his home on the Severn River. He also planted azaleas and a variety of ornamental and shade trees.

Though the spring-flowering plants dazzled visitors the most, Sherwood considered his evergreen collection his gardens' outstanding feature. His goal was to plant one specimen of every variety that would grow in Baltimore, and over the years, he amassed a renowned collection of 150-year-old English boxwoods.

By spring 1936, 24,000 tulips bloomed among 500 azaleas in Sherwood Gardens. By 1937, 42,000 tulips stood among 5,000 azaleas, along with 10,000 Swiss pansies filling out the beds. The *Baltimore News-Post* took note of the beauty, writing that "if a man makes a better rat-trap, the world will beat a path to his door, but if a man makes a scene of beauty and opens it to the public, the world will do the same— and go away blessing his name."

Within a few years, Sherwood Gardens had become not only Baltimore's No. 1 spring attraction, but also admired by people all over the world via photographs published in *The National Geographic Magazine*. In 1941, Peabody Institute teacher and composer Franz Bornschein was inspired by the gardens to create "The Earth Sings" for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. The piece premiered in November 1943 and was later broadcast to Allied forces around the world.

In 1944, 50,000 visitors were expected at the gardens, which, by then, were overseen by chief gardener Clarence G. Hammond, who masterminded the complex color schemes, plantings and maintenance until his death in 1965. War shortages meant Sherwood could get his hands on only 25,000 tulip bulbs for the 1945 gardens. But as soon as the war ended, he was first to place an

order with a Dutch grower who had staved off starvation during the war by eating his own tulip bulbs.

[ 1946 THROUGH 1965 ]

## The gardens thrive



As if marking a clear and colorful end to the dark war years, in 1946 John Sherwood's gardens bloomed more profusely than ever: 6,000 azaleas, 15,000 pansies, and what horticulturalists deemed "a collector's collection" of 106,000 tulips in 138 shades. Before the season ended, 100,000 visitors (40,000 on a single Sunday!) had visited.

"Dapper, tweedy persons rubbed shoulders with coatless, open-collared men; society matrons and sweater-clad girls found enjoyment in the display of tree, bush and flower," reported a Sun article in the 1950s. With so many people and cars — as well as the occasional tour bus— the city provided 14 or 15 police officers to direct traffic on Sundays.

Despite the crowds, scant damage occurred to the gardens, though occasional visitors wandered into private cocktail parties at surrounding houses. "Forty thousand mill over the grounds in one day, yet no flower will be picked, not a bush pulled or broken," said Sherwood. Chief gardener Hammond reported that the most destructive element was women's shoes. "Some of those tiny heels sink in so far that the women step out of their shoes," he told a Sun reporter. It usually took two months for the lawn to recover.

During the summer of 1953 rumors flew that the gardens were closing. Sherwood's wife had died in 1945, and in 1953, he bought a cattle ranch near Shawan, leasing his house to a friend. When Sherwood heard the rumors, he responded that the gardens "have been going for 25 years and I hope will continue for 25 more."

While his tulips were blooming on April 14, 1965, John W. Sherwood, then 93 years old, died. In his will he provided funds to operate the gardens for one more season.



[ 1966 THROUGH 2006 ]

## Decay and rebirth



Sherwood Gardens did open in 1966, but its future was uncertain. After the death of their father, the two Sherwood sons planned to sell the land that contained prime sections of the gardens: two acres on Stratford and Underwood and a three-quarter-acre parcel on Highfield. With a market value of \$100,000, neither the Guilford Association nor any other group rushed in. But then, at the urging of the Citizens Planning and Housing Association, which called the gardens “one of Baltimore’s unique and famous resources,” Mayor Theodore McKeldin, the city’s Park Board and the Guilford Association rallied.

By July 1966 the sons had dropped the price to \$50,000 and sold the land to the Stratford Green Corp., a non-profit established by the Guilford Association for garden fund-raising. The Park Board requested \$25,000 to fund the planting of the tulips and the city supplied annual funding until May 1970, when it announced drastic budget cuts. On a brighter note, that summer the Park Board agreed to help the Guilford Association fund

the refurbishment of the gardens. Though it had only been a few years since Sherwood’s death, vandalism and poor maintenance had taken their toll.

In an unprecedented international agreement, Dutch bulb experts established Windmill Nurseries in Bel Air, and were hired to oversee planting and year-round maintenance at Sherwood Gardens. Overgrowth was removed (a motorcycle was found beneath one “monster” azalea bush) and the lawn restored. Drainage pipes and security lights were installed, and 150,000 tulips and 6,000 pansies planted. Two hundred thousand visitors came in 1971; 250,000 by 1974.

The 1980s brought further revitalization, and in 1990 Dr. Bruce Barnett, current head of the Guilford Association tulip committee, started an Adopt a Plot program, in which 30 families and individuals now plant increasingly sophisticated and varied beds of annuals. Sherwood Gardens is no longer only a “scented gateway to summer”— but blooms from spring to frost.

Nowadays the annual cost of caring for the eight-acre gardens ranges from \$85,000 to \$90,000, and is paid by the Guilford community itself; the city’s longtime annual contribution of \$23,000 ended in 2004. Between 70,000 and 80,000 tulips from Dutch growers M & G Van Eeden Brothers are planted by ARC of Baltimore each fall, while Beechfield Landscapers in Woodbine, Md., handles all other maintenance.

In 1990, the Royal General Association of Bulb Growers added a tulip named ‘The Sherwood Gardens’ to the Classified List and International Register of Tulip Names. Each spring in a circular bed at the center of the gardens, 1,600 bright pink and white tulips display official recognition of the gardens’ international renown.

That homage, along with the fact that the Guilford community continues to care for the gardens for the benefit of the entire city long beyond the 25 years he'd wished for, would surely gratify John W. Sherwood, a consummate cultivator.

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