

## The HSMC Landscape

*By Mary Alves, Landscape Curator*

One of the great strengths of HSMC is its setting. The beauty of the river and the rural landscape add greatly to the appeal of the museum. Since our grounds are the original site of the city and the visitor spends quite a bit of time walking between formal exhibit areas, the landscape itself is a critical part of the experience.

Interpreting and maintaining the whole landscape of 832 acres, including the relatively small percentage (approximately 4 acres), that makes up the gardens and orchards, is analogous to caring for an indoor collection. Certain guiding principles apply. They include a protocol for planting that includes a check with the Research Department before any digging is done. This is designed to protect the archaeological resources.

Since this is a southern Maryland landscape, any new planting is limited to regionally native species. At the same time, invasive exotic species need to be controlled. A map and volunteer guide has been produced with the help of St. Mary's College students, which identifies and suggests control for the major pest species.

Much of the museum's holdings lie within 1000' of the shore, or within the space designated by the State as "The Critical Area." Certain restrictions on clearing and development, which are designed to protect tributaries and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay, apply. HSMC works closely with the Critical Area Commission on all aspects of development.

Approximately 140 acres are leased to local farmers who rotate crops of corn, soybeans and small grains. As required, Nutrient Management Plans and Farm Conservation Plans are being employed which govern the kinds and amounts of fertilizers that may be applied to these fields as well as tilling practices.

As a large, contiguous parcel of land on the edge of a burgeoning county, HSMC has become a de facto preserve. Our maintenance schedule respects the needs of the local bird population by not mowing fields during the nesting season. Certain areas that do not have archaeological resources have been reforested. In recognition of these efforts, the Maryland Community Forest Council has recognized HSMC as a PLANT Community.

For the gardens and orchards, historic plants varieties are used whenever possible. When insect, disease or maintenance concerns dictate that a more modern selection be made, the characteristics of the replacement match the historic model as closely as possible. Integrated Pest Management techniques are employed to maintain the grounds. The Commission has a Public Agency permit for pesticide spraying and the Landscape Curator is a certified pesticide applicator.

Research into the gardens is ongoing. Primary documents relating to the landscape at St. Mary's City are limited. English books and garden plans of the period are consulted for verification of commonly used species. Comparisons with other 17<sup>th</sup>-century sites are also helpful. HSMC is a charter member of a Historic Landscapes Group, which consists of horticultural staff of regional outdoor museums. Membership is also maintained in the Alliance for Historic Landscapes, the Maryland Native Plant Society and the Maryland Public Garden Consortium.

The landscape and gardens are designed and maintained according to ADA guidelines. Pathways are firm, stable, slip-resistant and wide enough to accommodate wheel chairs. Benches are conveniently located. Handicapped accessible water fountains have been added.

Since working and visiting outdoors involves certain hazards, periodic training sessions are held with the help of Patuxent River Naval Air Station. Their outreach personnel present a program on "The Hazards of Working Outdoors" which covers ticks, snakes, poison ivy, etc. Written materials are provided to all new staff at the beginning of each season.

A mowing plan has been developed which covers the whole site and addresses aesthetics, visitor expectations and safety, historical authenticity, and time constraints. The level of the turf is determined by the site use and interpretation as defined below. Certain areas are cut only once or twice during the season. This provides not only 17<sup>th</sup>-century ambience, but also habitat for wildflowers, birds and insects. However, by not allowing woody plants with their extensive root systems to take over, this schedule also preserves the archaeology. Extra staff is contracted from spring through fall to help with the grounds keeping. They are scheduled to work in highly public areas only during hours when visitors are not on site.

In terms of the interpretation and maintenance of the landscape, three separate areas have been identified, as described below.

### **The Memorial Landscape: The State House and the Margaret Brent Garden**

These landscapes are considered "sacred" spaces and deserving of honor. Because of this, visitors expect them to be well maintained, according to the present aesthetic. For the State House, this is obviously very different from how the original building would have appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Visitor handouts make clear that the current building and landscape represent the colonial revival era.

In the Margaret Brent Garden and Gazebo, the same sense of honor prevails. However since this area was designed in the 1980s, it most clearly represents a modern landscape. It should not be overlooked, however, that the garden incorporates elements from an older landscape (the Brome-Howard era). This area, as well as Town Center, provides an excellent opportunity to introduce the concept of "reading" the landscape.

### **The Exhibit Landscape: Town Center, the Chapel Site, the Woodland Indian Hamlet, the Visitor Center, Farthing's Complex**

In all of these areas, the historic landscape of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century has been much compromised. There is nothing left above ground of the original "character defining" features. Secondly, surrounding development has intruded in practically every sensory way – sight, sound, smell, and touch. In order to accommodate visitor needs and aid interpretation, modern amenities have been added and inconveniences have been eliminated.

The goal in these areas is to present an attractive, inviting scene. This is problematical since many visitors might imagine that this represents the original look of the city. It is therefore important to make clear that this landscape exhibits elements of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but does not attempt to re-create it. It is also important to note however, that this is the original site of the city and of some of the exhibits portrayed.

This approach gives us the opportunity to discuss the ongoing archaeology of the site. It also justifies the large shade trees, lawns, benches and signs.

### **The Immersion Landscape: the Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation**

Although not an original site or buildings, the Spray Plantation offers the best opportunity for an "immersion" experience. Due to its more remote location, modern intrusions are limited. The choice of location is used to explain settlement patterns.

The complex of garden, orchard, and fields as well as surrounding forest and navigable creek offer numerous landscape-related themes to interpret. The presence of a skilled staff that can convincingly portray 17<sup>th</sup>-century characters interacting with their environment is also critical since this is a cultural landscape. As a first person site, there is less reliance on signs and more on visitors' observations and conversations.

### **The Trail**

Connecting all of the outlying areas is a trail system with numbered markers keyed to a guide that describes the natural and cultural history of the site. The White House Millennium Council recognized the trail in 2000 as a Community Millennium Trail. A volunteer stewardship committee maintains it.