Bedford Alum Springs Hotel Site (New London, VA) Retains Several Features of Victorian Period Landscaping (1850-1900)

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Background

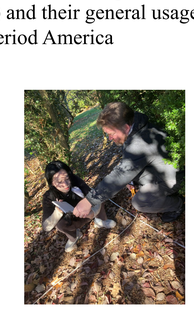
From the 1850s to 1930s, the Bedford Alum Springs Hotel was a popular location for guests traveling to New London, VA to visit the mineral springs and experience the many purported health benefits associated with it (Pezzoni, 2021). Alongside the natural beauty of the springs was the attractive landscaping on the grounds of the hotel and resort which, according to the Washington Post in 1880, had "a magnificent grassy lawn, embracing 7,000 square yards of ground, ornamented with beautiful shade trees, a handsome fountain, and a summer house for the accommodation of the band…" The article goes on to describe the "charming," quarter-mile "promenade to the spring… shaded by hedges and beautiful shade trees." Read (1950) tells us that boxwoods were among the shrubs planted on the grounds and that "osage orange trees [were] planted along the walk leading to the old quarries…" A quick stroll around the grounds reveals that many of these features still exist today and that we are not very far from being able to recreate the magnificent landscaping of this once grand hotel and resort.

Research Question

- Which, if any, of the current landscape features at the Bedford Alum Springs Hotel site are characteristic of the Victorian Period of American landscaping (1850-1890)?

Methods

- Building on a recent landscape inventory (Crowther 2021a, 2021b), we focused our research efforts on six of the most historically important plants in front yard area of hotel site:
  - American Boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*)
  - English Boxwood (*B. sempervirens* 'Suffruiticosa')
  - Common Lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*)
  - Osage Orange (*Maclura pomifera*)
  - Southern Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*)
  - American Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*)
- We investigated specific historical references to these species at hotel site (e.g. Read, 1950; S.A.C., 1880) and their general usage in gardens and landscapes of Victorian Period America (Favretti and Favretti, 2017).
- We plotted locations of plants and other historic landscape features on maps using metric measuring tapes.
- Proximity to other historic landscape features included:
  - Brick pathway, edged with gray stones, throughout front yard area
  - Concrete and brick basin near center of front lawn area
  - Possible site of former guest cottage on east side of property
- We also measured width of exposed stone-edged brick pathway, overall size of concrete and brick basin, and length and width of Common Lilacs at possible site of former guest cottage.



Photos by Timothy R. Brophy

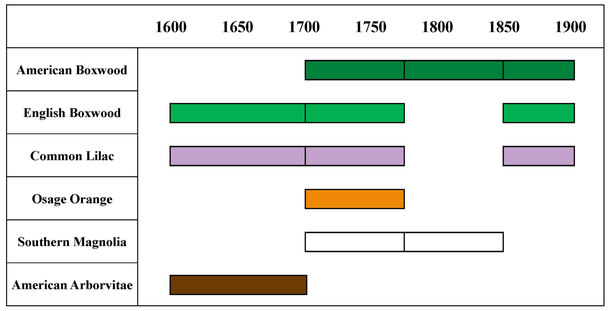


Figure 1. Periods of "popular usage" for several current landscape plants at the Bedford Alum Springs Hotel site according to Favretti & Favretti (2017).

Table 1. Current landscape features at the Bedford Alum Springs Hotel site that were most likely also present during the Victorian Period (1850-1890).

	F&F 2017	1880 WaPo	1885 Pamphlet	1880s Engraving	1920s Post & Photo	Read 1950	1950s Photos
Fountains/Basins in Lawn Area with Shrubs	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Central Walkway	✓		✓	✓			
Boxwoods Growing in Association with Paths	✓					✓	✓
Osage Oranges Along Walkway to Mineral Spring		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Foundation Plantings (Including Shrubs)	✓				✓		✓
Various Evergreens & Deciduous Plants Together	✓		✓				
Fruit Trees in Rear Yard with Shade Trees in Front	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Shrubs Edging Property Boundaries	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Summerhouse/Gazebo Structure in Lawn Area	✓	✓			✓	✓	

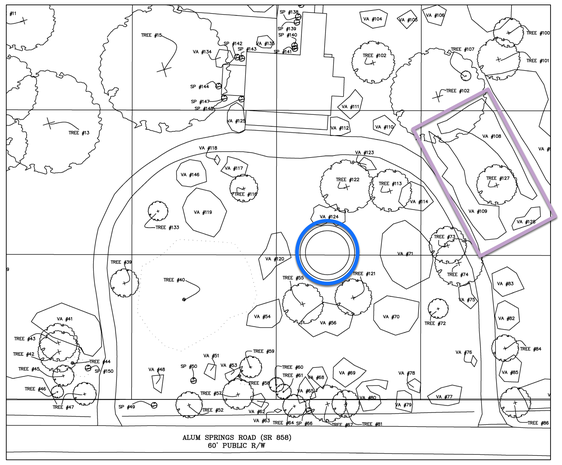


Figure 2. Map of Bedford Alum Springs Hotel site from May, 2021 landscape inventory (Crowther, 2021a). Blue=Concrete & Brick Basin; Purple=Rectangular Area of Common Lilacs.

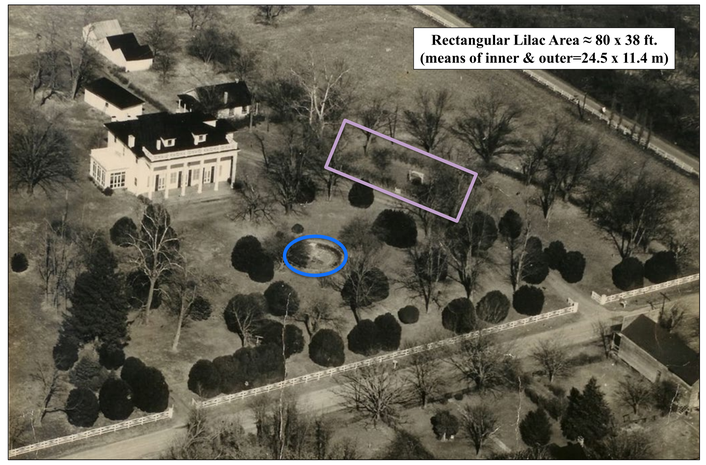


Figure 3. ca. 1950 Aerial Photo of Bedford Alum Springs Hotel site (The Friends of New London Library). Blue=Concrete & Brick Basin; Purple=Rectangular Area of Common Lilacs.

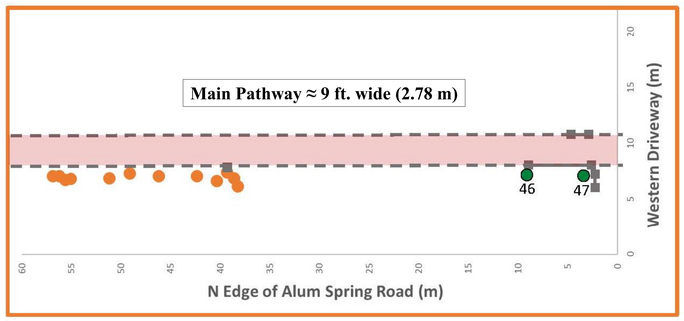


Figure 4. Current position of Osage Orange trees and American Boxwoods, along Alum Springs Road in southwest corner of property, in relation to exposed stone edges of walkway. Presumed extent of stone edges and brick center of walkway. Numbers correspond to landscape inventory (Crowther, 2021a).

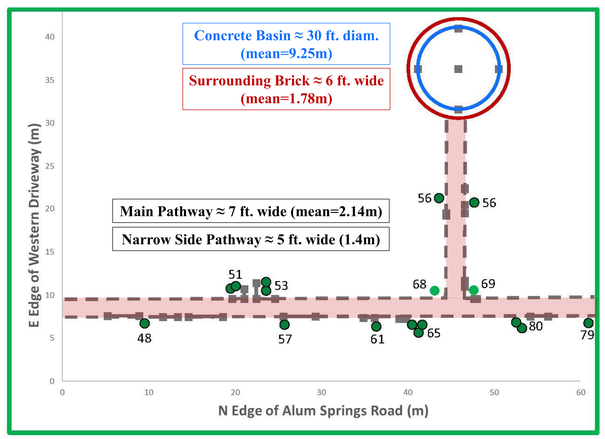


Figure 5. Current position of English and American Boxwoods, in front lawn area of property, in relation to exposed stones edges of walkway and concrete & brick basin. Presumed extent of stone edges and brick center of walkway. Numbers correspond to landscape inventory (Crowther, 2021a).

Results and Conclusions

- All plants we investigated were popular in American landscaping during Victorian Period or earlier (Fig. 1), and current landscaping features coincide with nearly a dozen general features prominent during Victorian Period (Table 1).
- Several current landscaping plants and features are specifically referenced or seen in books, newspaper articles, advertisements, and photos related to the historic 19th century hotel (Table 1).
- Large, thick-trunked American and English Boxwoods currently surround concrete/brick basin and are located on both sides of exposed brick/stone pathway leading to basin in front lawn area (Fig. 2, 3 & 5).
- Large Osage Oranges trees currently located on south side of exposed brick/stone pathway only, in southwest corner of property immediately adjacent to Alum Springs Rd. (Fig. 4).
- Archaeologists found evidence of same pathways, thought to be of 1870s origin, throughout front yard area including portions radiating in all four cardinal directions from concrete/brick basin (Randy Lichtenberger, pers. comm.).
- Arrangement of plants in relation to pathways and basin represents "a definite design intent" (Crowther, 2021b) and suggests that plantings and locations of landscape features (including original fountain in same "off-axis" position as basin) are all original to 1870s hotel period (Pezzoni, 2021).
- Rectangular area of Common Lilacs (Fig. 2 & 3) may be remnants/descendants of foundation plantings (Crowther, 2021b) common during Victorian Period. However, it may also be unlikely that lilacs are original to 19th century hotel period because they might sit over foundations of an 1870s building discovered inside that area (Randy Lichtenberger, pers. comm.).
- Based on these evidences, we conclude that the Bedford Alum Springs Hotel Site (New London, VA) retains several features of Victorian Period landscaping (1850-1900).

Future Work

- We are planning to perform dendrochronology on some of the larger trees on the property to determine precise ages.

References

Aerial Photos of Bedford Alum Springs Hotel Property, 1923, ca. 1950, and 1955 (USDA Soil Survey). The Friends of New London Library. New London, Virginia.

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