STENTON
(Letitia Ellicott Wright's Colonial Revival Garden)
4601 North 18th Street
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HALS PA-24
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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STENTON
Letitia Ellicott Wright's Colonial Revival Garden

HALS NO. PA-24

Location: 4601 North 18th Street, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania

Latitude: 40.024814, Longitude: -75.153715 (Center of Mansion, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: Stenton's landscape exemplifies early 20th-century trends in landscape and garden design as well as historic preservation. The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has preserved Stenton, opening it to the public as an historic site in 1899. In so doing, the Colonial Dames joined the vanguard of ladies' organizations driving America's fledgling preservation movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Stenton also hosted the founding luncheon of The Garden Club of America at Stenton May 1, 1913.

The site largely resembles the 1911 plan by landscape architect, John Caspar Wister (1887-1982), with a later change to the gates and drive by landscape architect, George Patton (1920-1991), in the 1960s. Stenton's Colonial Revival landscape is a significant expression of early 20th-century cultural ideals including fascination with the 18th-century past, plants as relics (boxwood from Mt. Vernon) and historic plantings, interest in native plants, and formal design with colorfully planted garden beds and paths. The Colonial Dames conducted historical research in the Logan family papers to assemble a list of plants collected by James Logan (1674-1752) and William Logan (1718-1776) in the 18th century. This list led to creation of a historically-inspired planting scheme bedded into the classically designed form with a central lawn, paths and parterres, now known as Stenton's Colonial Revival Garden. Logan descendant, Letitia Ellicott Wright (1861-1933), served as Stenton's first garden chair. Her 1911-1913 Stenton Garden Scrapbook documents the planning, construction, purchases and donations, as well as planting and early maintenance of the Colonial Revival Garden. The planting scheme has evolved over its first century, as the Colonial Dames experimented with the successes and failings of Wright's suggested planting schemes and changes in the tree canopy. Stenton's Colonial Revival Garden remains a significant historic landscape feature and cultural artifact, serving as an extension of the house as an 'historic object lesson'. Because many comparable Beaux Arts gardens on private estates in the greater Philadelphia region have disappeared, Stenton's garden has become a rare survivor of its time.

Description: The Colonial Dames maintain just less than three acres of James Logan's 18th-century 511-acre Stenton plantation, situated in the northwest corner of Stenton

Park in Philadelphia. The historic site acreage is currently separated from the Park by a chain-link fence and shallow woodland. The c.1730 early Georgian house sits at the center of the landscape surrounded by herringbone brick paths and lawns joined to a kitchen-wash house by a covered piazza, as well as a connected greenhouse and contiguous former carriage house. Other remaining outbuildings include a stone barn, icehouse, privy, and log house (moved to the site in 1969). The Colonial Revival Garden, designed to complement the existing colonial house and enhance the interpretation of a Colonial American house garden, abuts Stenton Park at the northeast corner of the property.

Although its basic form is preserved, Stenton's Colonial Revival Garden has contracted and transformed over the course of the 20th century. An outer path with parterres that was part of the original garden scheme, designed in 1911 is no longer extant, with billowing box that has grown over the path and taken its place.

1901 - Mary Johnson Brown Chew (1839-1927) proposed planting trees and honeysuckle in conjunction with Arbor Day in April. These Arbor Day plantings proved popular during Stenton's first years. Colonial Dames Societies from other states donated trees to the effort.

1911 – Stenton Garden Committee Chair, Letitia Wright, and the Society began implementing John Caspar Wister's plan, with a screen of native woodland plantings for the perimeter of the property, as well the formal geometric plan for the Colonial Revival Garden, which included rectangular paths of inner and outer parterres surrounding a rectangular lawn. Decisions about the planting scheme for the Garden were left to the Stenton Garden Committee and Wright, who had mined the Logan papers for evidence of historic plantings. Wright suggested a colorful planting scheme influenced by contemporary garden designer Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932). Wright's carefully researched plantings were incorporated into Wister's plan of boxwood borders and geometric flowerbeds.

An excerpt from *Stenton's Cultural Landscape*, by Lil Chance (1927-2013), best describes the early days of the garden as we know it today: "As work began, the garden area was ploughed and manured, beds were laid out and edged with boards, a deep ash foundation was set for the paths between the beds, and the brick walks were laid. The foundation of an old wall was found and rebuilt upon, and seeds of annuals were sown. Other Logan heirs were consulted, and agreed "that the old garden, originally comprising two acres, was placed exactly where we are now laying it out." Pipes at last brought water to the garden from a hydrant in the park. All this in time for Mayor Raeburn to hold a national city-planning meeting at Stenton on May 15. The eminent Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) "expressed himself as finding the garden perfectly charming, and only suggested that the *pyrus [pieris] japonica* might be removed, as it was not a colonial plant." Despite the scholarly rhetoric of Mary Chew and Letitia Wright, the plant material placed in the new garden did not always strictly adhere to the Logans' 18th-

century purchases. This is also true of Wister's "Box borders," never recorded at Stenton previously.

Mrs. Wright continued to refine and focus her research into useful lists of plants actually purchased for Stenton, drawing heavily on William Logan's extensive orders after 1750, than from her more generalized observations of plants available in the 18th century found in her booklet, "The Colonial Garden at Stenton Described in Old Letters."

Wright's lists reveal the interpretive latitude of the time. While some of the plants listed are clearly identified by complete botanic name (*betula nigra*, for example) others are simply listed by species ("salix – several sorts") and some only by contemporary common name. The latter is particularly true of the flowers that bedded into the new garden. This lack of specificity allowed the Garden Committee to order appropriately "old-fashioned" Plants. The Committee planted a variety of roses, perennials, annuals, and bulbs, most of which corresponded to items on the Logan lists, and focused especially on tulips."

2013 - Landscape Architect Claudia Levy has proposed "rejuvenating" Stenton's Colonial Revival Garden. Over time, lack of maintenance has taken its toll, and the billowing boxwood border is overgrown, obscuring the outer garden parterre. Within this tall and wide boxwood border, a series of slightly raised flower beds framed with wood boards and crushed stone paths form a rectilinear geometric pattern, with a brick-lined manicured lawn at the center. A shallow woodland space exists between the boxwood border and a chain link fence, through which one can see a partially obscured view of the park, playground and neighborhood row homes. Some of the original plants from Wright's era linger on, including iris, English ivy, the boxwoods, and narcissus and snow drops in the adjacent woodland space. Colonial Revival plants from the inventory in the current garden are as follows: phlox, roses, chrysanthemums, coreopsis, peonies, columbine, Dame's rocket, ferns, iris, foxgloves, anemone, forget-me-nots, daffodils, and tulips. In 2013 we added yucca, native wisteria (to be pruned into tree forms), Acelepias tuberosa, Baptisia australis, and native columbine.

Future - Levy proposes restoring Wister's and Wright's plans as much as possible, including gradual pruning and reduction of the boxwoods, adding an "echo" of the outer most parterres that restores the original footprint of the garden, and restoring and implementing Wister's 1911 perimeter woodland planting screen with reductions in the planting density. The Stenton Garden Committee will reintroduce plants from the original and historical plant lists as much as possible.

History: **The Logan Family and Stenton**

Built between 1723 and1730, Stenton was the home of James Logan (1674-1751), Secretary to William Penn. Today, the house is a museum interpreting three

generations of the Logan family. The Logans were prominent Philadelphia Quakers actively involved in Colonial politics and trade and later, the United States. The history of Stenton is rich with early American stories, told through the experiences of one family but also reflecting wider issues and changes central to the development of the United States.

The Colonial Revival – In the 19th-century, many Americans celebrated national identity by documenting the events of their time and forefathers, glorifying the past. As a larger and later 19th-century design movement, the Colonial Revival swept America by storm in the post-Centennial (1876) era. Architecturally, interest in the Colonial Revival spurred the restoration of Colonial buildings as well as the building of new structures that visually connected with Colonial architecture. The Colonial Revival manifested itself in myriad ways, one of which was the founding of patriotic societies like The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1891. The NSCDA/PA followed in the footsteps of Deborah Norris Logan (1761-1839), wife of James Logan's grandson, in taking on Stenton as a preservation project, recognizing its importance as the former home of William Penn's distinguished Secretary.

Preservation of Stenton
Stenton remained in the Logan family until the early years of the 20th century. It survives through the devotion and hard work of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Offered the chance to save Stenton in 1899, the Dames rose to the challenge and for 114 years have preserved and maintained this important component of our nation's heritage. When the City of Philadelphia acquired the property in 1910 it charged The NSCDA/PA "to preserve and maintain Stenton as an historic object lesson."

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Historian: Laureen Griffin, Stenton Gardener
Laura Keim, Stenton Curator
Dennis Pickeral, Stenton Director

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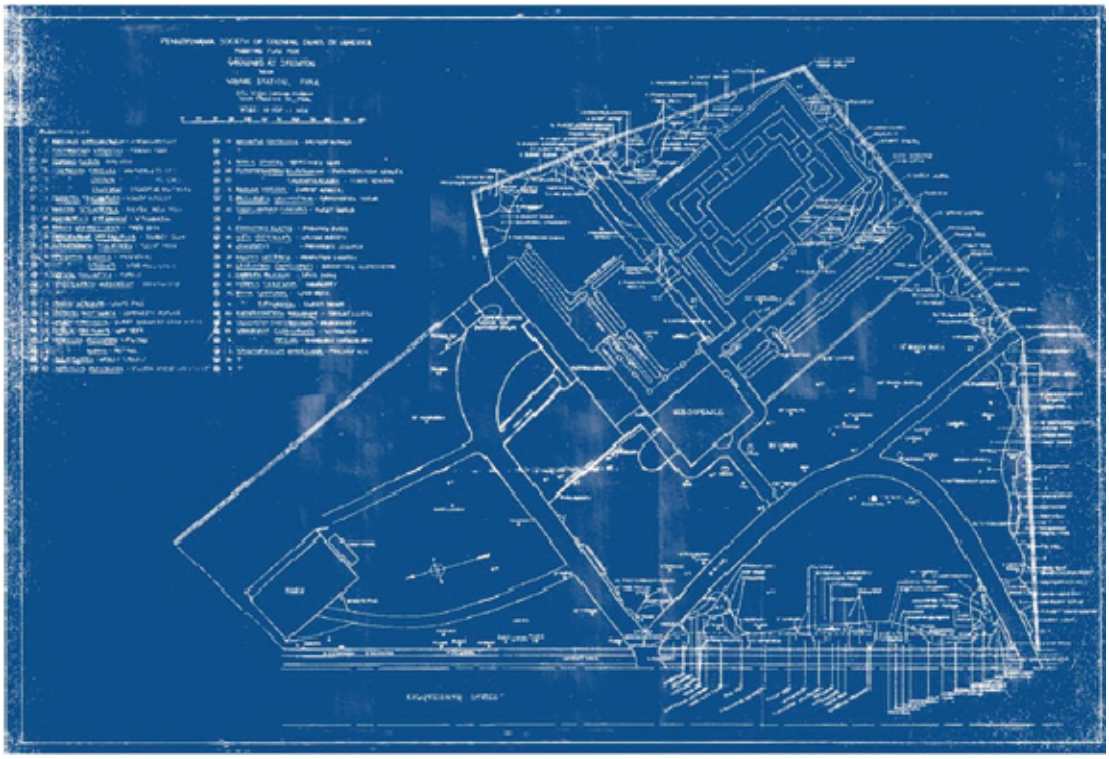
July 31, 2013

2013 HALS Challenge Entry: *Documenting the Cultural Landscapes of Women*



John Caspar Wister, Landscape Plan for Stenton (Stenton Archives, 1911).

Stenton Colonial Revival Garden looking northeast (Charles Pancoast, August 23, 1911. Letitia Ellicott Wright's Stenton Garden Scrapbook, page 21. Stenton Archives).

Stenton Colonial Revival Garden looking west (Claudia L. Levy, 2013).

Stenton Colonial Revival Garden looking southeast (Claudia L. Levy, 2013).