



Garden Notes: As Time Goes By

With the words written on November 20, 1898, “The roses are still blooming at Tudor as are the chrysanthemums and a few violets,” Armistead Peter Jr., (1870-1960), the third owner of Tudor Place, alluded for the first time to what became a lifelong passion, the garden surrounding the historic mansion that his family called home.¹ Information on the history of the garden of Tudor Place is gleaned from his extensive and detailed diaries, where he recorded the everyday and extraordinary events in his life. Buried within these notes are descriptions of the cyclical nature of the garden he loved.

Except for periods of absence for travel or debilitating illness, his diaries are a timepiece by which the clock of the garden is set. As early as 1899 he observed that the flowers at Tudor Place were planted about the 10th of May and taken up sometime the first week of October to be potted and placed in the greenhouse. (September 22, 1899) His diaries record this unalterable procedure throughout the years of 1899-1945. As he grew older, he noted with increasing regularity the exact date the plants were taken to and from the greenhouse every year. The dates vary slightly. When appropriate, Peter explained why an alteration in routine occurred. For example, on one occasion the plants were removed from the controlled shelter as late as May 31, three weeks later than usual owing to the unseasonably cold weather of 1929. The earliest date he recorded for taking in the plants was October 1, 1941, due to the fact that the gardener had been called for jury duty to begin on October 6. He observed the atmospheric conditions with rigid regularity: cloudy to clear, cloudy and damp, sleet and rain, hazy, showers, thunder showers, clear and warm, clear and hot, windy, and very occasionally, “Another scorcher!” (March 23, 1907)

He and his grandmother, Britannia Peter Kennon (1815-1911), were devoted to the garden; Peter held her praise and encouragement for his work there in high esteem and always noted it. Elderly and often bedridden, Britannia Kennon often watched him from her window as he worked on the grounds. She was always “most interested in the planting.” (November 15, 1901) He observed almost yearly the appearance of the Lilies of the Valley on the site. These lilies were his grandmother's favorite flower. Every year he brought her the first of the season, always described as “a splendid bunch.” (April 27, 1908)

The garden's roots were deeply entwined with household tradition encouraged by his grandmother. May 9, 1902 was a great day! Armistead Peter Jr.'s son, Armistead Peter 3rd (1896-1983), sat at the dining room table with the adults for the first time. The six-year-old boy was the guest of honor at

lunch, and Britannia Kennon, his great-grandmother, marked the occasion at his place with a glass of daily rose buds, “which she picked herself from bushes planted by her Mother [Martha Custis Peter] on either side of the Temple [Portico].” Armistead Peter Jr., pressed these very roses in his diary, where they remain today. A few years later, on Britannia’s 93rd birthday, she bequeathed to him a Loving Cup, and instructed him, “to put the first spring violets from Tudor in it each year.” He was honored and vowed to do so! (January 28, 1908) From that day on he always noted when he found the first violets in bloom, and as late as 1929, years after she had died, he admitted, “How I watch for them and gather them for Grandmother!” (March 17, 1929)

Armistead Peter Jr., worked in the garden right alongside the gardeners who cared for it. He was particularly fond of and close to John Lockett (1836-1906), who had worked for Britannia Kennon in many capacities for many years. Lockett trained Armistead Peter 3rd in the same traditions that he had taught the boy’s father. In 1902 John Lockett showed the boy how to plant popcorn; this became an annual event. (May 5, 1902, May 14, 1903) Armistead Peter 3rd watched John Lockett fix the old arbor at the end of the Center Walk, and soon enough the boy was helping his own father plant cedar trees on 31st Street. (April 18, April 21, 1903) After Lockett’s death, Armistead Peter Jr., planted hyacinth and tulip bulbs to fulfill his promise to him to do so. (November 26, 1906) Now Peter worked harder than ever in the garden for his grandmother “to find things just as John used to keep them.” (March 27, 1907)

But while the cyclical monotony of the garden pleased him, in converse fashion a disruption in its cycle displeased him greatly. On August 1, 1926 he observed, “This is the first time that Tudor has ever been without a vegetable garden, but I could get no one to help cultivate it this Spring, so had to do without it.”

As the diaries progressed, Peter became more and more rigid in his demands and expectations. While his ability to maintain upkeep of the house diminished for reasons beyond his control, he struggled to hold onto the garden and its history of memories. Its traditions had been instilled in him early in life. The Daily Rose Bush was the very one that his grandmother had known as a girl. The Japonica had been named “Britannia” in her honor by Cousin Robert Dick (March 31, 1907, March 25, 1908); on May 29, 1919 Peter sadly noted its death and added that the gardener had taken a cutting which perhaps would live. He skillfully shepherded the Sago Palm that his great grandmother, Martha Custis Peter, had purchased on a trip to Philadelphia in 1813.

For while in his lifetime the house underwent radical deterioration, it was in the garden that familiar incident repeated itself. When in 1929 a new wood seat of cypress was fitted into place in the Arbor, he noted that his son Armistead Peter 3rd thought that his own daughter, Anne, “will be old ere it disintegrates.” But the elder Peter wisely added, “Maybe! [But] I have seen two before this one –the last, of heavy white pine. When Ben Dailey fitted it, he was sure we would never see it rot!” (April 9, 1972) In the garden Peter had grown from boy to manhood to old age. He admitted in his diary, “I often feel as though I was Rip Van Winkle – a stranger in my own home. With all the changes that have occurred, it is as though I was but a cipher returned for a short space of time to see what is happening”. (March 31, 1929)

His disorientation continued to grow and he began to withdraw from society, but his interest in the garden where he managed to maintain some moderate control never dwindled. He sought sanctuary

where time alternated readily between the past and the present. He was not the first to find solace in a garden; the comfort he found there is well documented in the literature of our time. He still searched for the first violets of the season for his grandmother, but no longer with his young son. Now he searched with his eight-year-old granddaughter Anne, who found a new patch, “and was delighted.” (April 5, 1930) The hyacinths he planted for John Lockett returned each spring. The years passed and his son, Armistead Peter 3rd, assumed more responsibility for the garden, and often there was a tug of war between father and son. Armistead Peter Jr., feared that the loss of a strict tradition would bring about the ultimate destruction of the garden; his son, who embraced more modern ways, feared that strict tradition would bring about the ultimate destruction of the garden. Father and son looked out of the same windows but saw different worlds.

Armistead Peter Jr.'s, family had lived at Tudor Place since 1805; they had witnessed History turning her pages with flying fingers every day. Armistead Peter Jr., could not escape her, yet he saw that History was a careless mistress, as tradition was lost in the chaff she cast off. He tried in his diaries to carry all the years carefully in his arms, but even for him this was not possible. Yet History's cast offs and what he recorded are the golden threads we follow. A wayward flower, the stump of a tree, or a rock in an unusual location, are as vocal as the words he wrote; through these we retrieve what has been carelessly or carefully left behind.

- Wendy Kail, Archivist

¹ Tudor Place Historic House & Garden Archive, Washington, D.C., MS 14, Armistead Peter Jr., Papers, Diary entry November 20, 1898. Subsequent entries are taken from the diaries of Armistead Peter Jr.