

John Lee Pratt's Chatham Manor

Judith B. Tankard, Boston, Massachusetts

Frances Benjamin Johnston's iconic photographs of Chatham Manor in 1927 (featured in *Gardens for a Beautiful America* by Sam Watters) capture a moment when the famously lush gardens dazzled with color. It must have been a source of pride for Ellen Shipman, who designed the gardens in 1921 for Col. Daniel Devore and his wife, Helen. Fastidious about including maintenance notes on her detailed planting plans, Shipman was renowned for helping her clients keep their gardens looking perfect and often helped them find trained gardeners. Little is known, however, about the fate of most of Shipman's gardens as they age, but fortunately for Chatham, we have some answers. A family photo album belonging to the subsequent owner provides a unique chapter in the life cycle of a Shipman garden.

In 1931, John Lee Pratt (1879-1975) and his wife, Lillian Thomas Pratt (1876-1947), then in their mid-fifties, purchased historic Chatham Manor in Fredericksburg, Virginia, as a retirement home along with a nearby working farm. John Lee Pratt, a former vice-president of General Motors Corporation and a philanthropist, was one of America's wealthiest men. The Pratts assembled over 250 photographs of the house, gardens, and grounds in all seasons as well as family outings, such as yachting expeditions along the Rappahannock. Pratt's prize-winning cattle and racehorses as well as generations of family dogs are also featured. Even though the Pratts had no children, the album is filled with snapshots of happy children playing in Shipman's gardens, enjoying the lily pond, and romping in the lush flower borders. Other family members (and later nurses) dutifully pose throughout the gardens. Winter scenes of Chatham show record snowfalls covering mounds of boxwood, the parterres, and the garden ornaments.

The photographs date from 1931 until 1947, the year of Lillian Pratt's death. At some point the album was given to Anne Barber Bruin (1886-1971), the Pratts' long-time housekeeper, who brought it with her when she retired to Hagerstown, Maryland. In the 1970s it was given to the architectural historian John Franklin Miller, who was then affiliated with Hampton National Historic Site in Towson

(also shown in the album) and interested in historic preservation. (Miller later spearheaded the restoration of Shipman's garden at Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens in Ohio.) When Miller learned I was working on a new edition of my book on Ellen Shipman, he generously gave me the album. Its final home is the Cherokee Garden Library at the Atlanta History Center. A companion album of the Devore-era gardens is at the College of William and Mary Special Collections.

Rumor has it that John Lee Pratt was not a great fan of Shipman's labor-intensive gardens. He felt that the endless stream of garden visitors and curiosity-seekers detracted from his privacy, especially after 1938, when the gardens were featured on the Garden Club of Virginia's Historic Garden Week tour. As early as 1931, he contacted the prominent landscape architect Charles Freeman Gillette



Lillian Pratt and artist, 1940.

Photo by Judson Smith.



Chatham Manor, Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1937.

Photo by Judson Smith.

(1886-1969) for planting plans for the parterre garden featuring yellow and blue flowers, but nothing may have come of it. In 1943, he contacted Gillette again, stating that his gardener had left to go into war service and there was no one with any knowledge of managing the greenhouses (shown in the album) or trimming the hedges. After Lillian Pratt's death, Gillette simplified the gardens in 1954, calling for the complete removal of Shipman's famous parterres and other labor-intensive beds along the axial walk as well as replacement of the curvilinear stepping stone paths (shown in the album) with flat, rectilinear stepping stone paths. Twenty-one years later, Pratt bequeathed Chatham Manor and its drastically changed grounds to the National Park Service, now part of the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Plans are currently underway to reinterpret the gardens at Chatham Manor with the goal of a restoration to an earlier era.



Thanks to John Franklin Miller for presenting me with the album



Chatham in spring, 1938.
Photo by Judson Smith.

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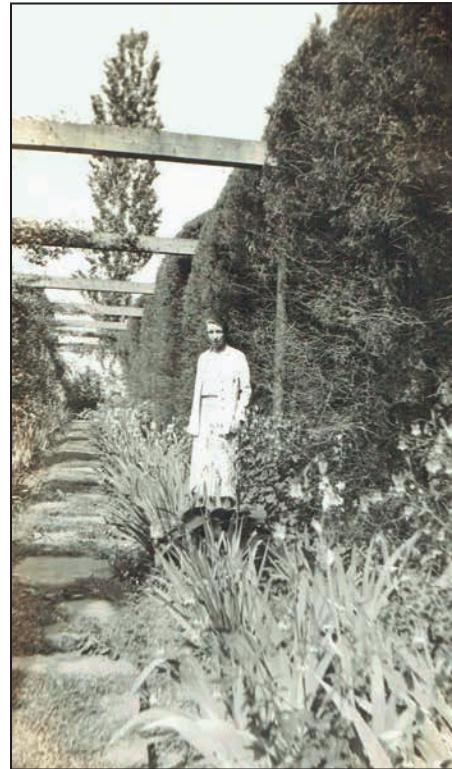
Lillian Pratt and artist, 1940.
Photo by Judson Smith.

role in the rehabilitation of one of Ellen Shipman's most important commissions.

A revised edition of landscape historian Judith B. Tankard's 1998 classic, Ellen Shipman and the American Garden, is forthcoming in February 2018.



Children playing in lily pond in front of summerhouse, 1930s.
Photo by Judson Smith.



Pergola with iris, 1936.
Photo by Judson Smith.



Walled garden in winter, 1939.
Photo by Judson Smith.