

Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site Formal Gardens

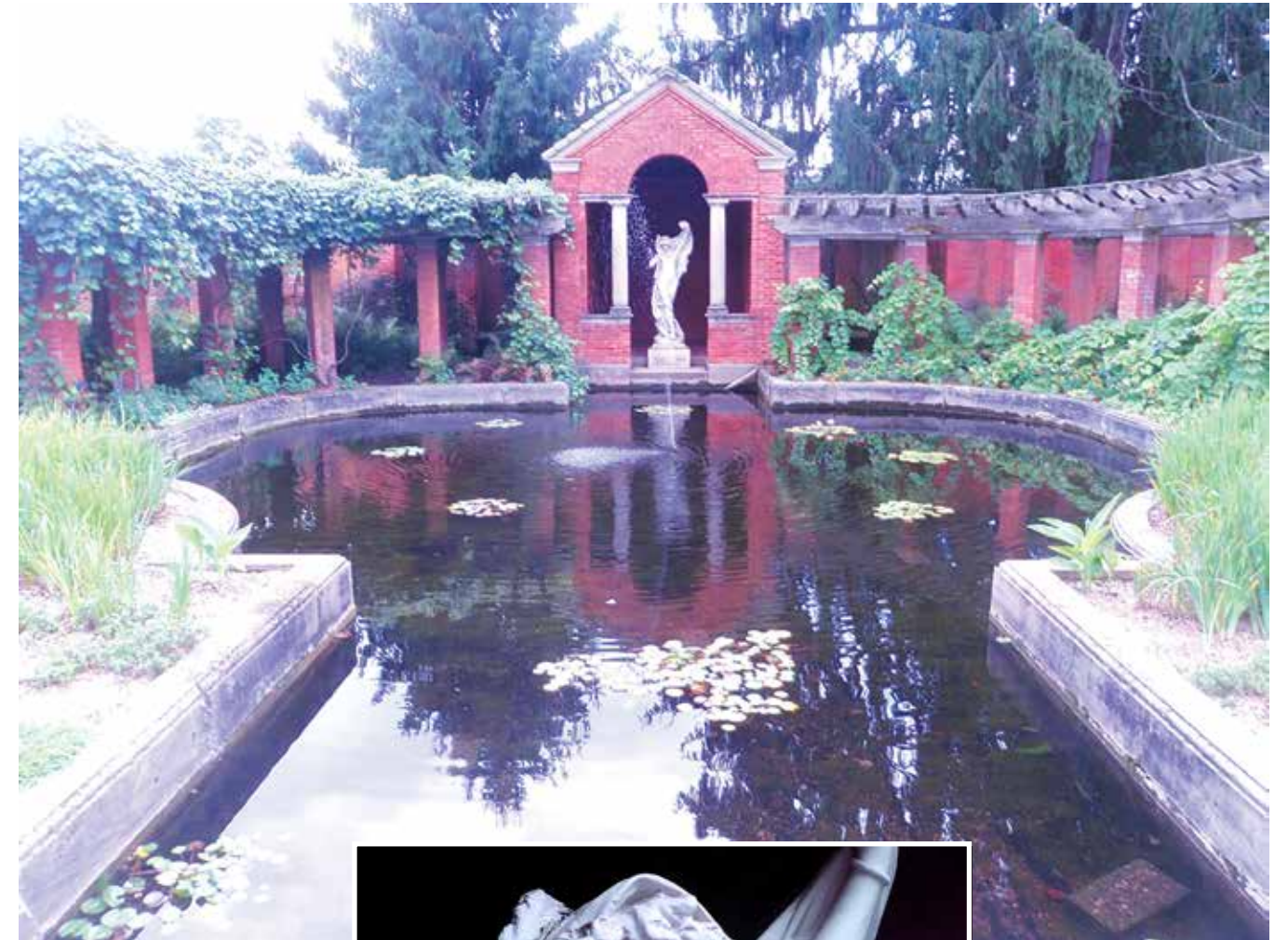
by **Ralph J. Ferrusi**

Kath saw in a local paper that there was going to be a “garden tour” at the Vanderbilt Mansion gardens. “Let’s go!!!” When I worked as a Historic Hudson Valley tour guide in 2007-2008 (ten years ago: can’t be!!!) we walked the Vanderbilt grounds, gardens, and hiking trails (we always walked down to Bard Rock (Boating on the Hudson and Beyond, “Another Great Day On The River”, April 2018, Page 29)) with it’s spectacular view up the reach to Norrie, so I was really looking forward to this hadn’t-been-there-in-a-long-time revisit.

It was a grey, kind of gloomy day. We parked by the Visitor Center, where a Ranger told us it was “a two-minute walk” to

the Gardens. Having Been There Done That many many times with my tour groups, I asked him if he was a competitive speed walker... We joined a small group of other “garden tourers” by the Tool House in the northwest corner above the gardens, and our guide—a long-time Vanderbilt Garden volunteer—gave us a detailed overview of the gardens and their history, and many details, facts, and figures.

Here’s the story: Dr. Samuel Bard, who died there in 1821 (and who I would guess owned the place), first designed the landscape, and planted exotic plants in the “European picturesque style”(interesting aside: he “probably” planted the



1799-vintage Ginkgo tree that is “one of the CONTINENT’S oldest” in the middle of the big lawn south of the mansion that I’d bet the farm that 99.9% of the zillions of people that noodle by it every year simply ignore as “just another tree” unless they are told otherwise by “someone in the know”).

Bard’s son sold the place to his father’s medical partner, who built the first formal gardens and greenhouses. When the partner died the estate was broken up, until Walter Langdon Jr. came along and laid out formal gardens and hired architects to design the still-existing Gardner’s Cottage, Tool House, and garden walls. Frederick and Louise Vanderbilt bought the estate in 1895, and redesigned the gardens and, good for them, “planted hundreds of trees and shrubs” that they could walk through twice a day on weekends. Whadda life.. When they died, childless, the mansion was left to a niece, who couldn’t sell it. Neighbor FDR suggested she donate it to the National Park Service, and the site opened to the public in 1940.

Over time, the gardens became a train wreck, generally forgotten for over 30 years. In 1950 a windstorm damaged the greenhouses,



and they were torn down. In the late ‘60’s the NPS began documenting the ruins, and in the ‘70’s received a grant to partially restore them. Restoration of the brick walls began, and was completed in 1983. Then, in 1984 along came the Frederick W. Vanderbilt Garden Association (FWVGA), TO THE RESCUE!!!

Three local gardeners, Martha (Marti) Stuart, Louise Martin and Marion Asher—bless them—asked the NPS for permission to restore the plantings in the garden. That fall, FWVGA now had 32 volunteers. The annuals then contained 6,500 plants, and by mid-1986 the perennial garden had about 3,200 plants!!! In 1987 1,400 rose bushes were planted in the rose garden.

“Barefoot Katie” was placed at the south end of the Pool in the 1920’s, coyly gazing across the amazingly black-colored (“achieved through a chemical, non-toxic dye” giving it its reflective qualities and, controlling algae) Reflecting Pool .

The landscape—five acres of tiered gardens and gravel paths—has now been restored to its original 1930’s appearance, but



“is still only an echo of the original”, and the FWVGA remains committed to bringing it as close as they can to its former 1930’s Glory. BRAVO, FWVGA.

I was itching to get down to the gardens (mostly out of sight downhill) and to start taking pictures, so honestly, I zoned out at times. I must admit something here. We’ve Traveled the World, mostly on our own but sometimes with groups/guides. In my experience guides—and particularly “local” guides—are pretty much compelled to barrage you—in excruciating detail—every possible fact and figure in their brains concerning what is, for them,

their home court: the phrase “TMI”—Too Much Information—at times becomes quickly, at least to me, very relevant.

A couple of examples come to mind: the guy on the Altiplano in Bolivia who spent (it seemed) about two hours talking about a (small-ish) rock! Mari, our wonderful guide in Turkey, going stone by stone for miles in Ephesus, one of the most famous ruins on the planet. I got cross-eyed after about the 3,000th stone.

And, on our recent trip to Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania, hearing each region’s history from the Dawn of Civilization to The Kicking Out of the Communists, seemingly minute-by minute,



by every single one of the local guides: crap, here’s a summary: the Ottomans (isn’t an Ottoman a small stool???) and then the Communists were belligerent oppressive jerks, and these countries became far better places after they were (finally) kicked out: ‘nuff said... Back to Vanderbilt.

We finally headed over and down to the gardens: at the first sight of this awesome, begging-to-be-photographed sight I stopped dead in my tracks—WOWZER!!!—gawking, I just HAD to take pictures. The Group, obediently lined up behind our guide, simply walked over to the “gazebo” in northeast corner of the Formal Gardens, the next “stop on the tour”!!! I took pictures, then rejoined them.

We then walked along the path on the east side of the gardens down to the reflecting pool and winsome “Katie”, and finally down to the rose garden. The roses were not anywhere near as spectacularly in bloom as the up-above Formal Gardens. I don’t know why, but this was often the case in my many visits with my tour groups over this years; my recollection is the FDR rose gardens were always much more spectacular.

We walked back up and along the south end of the gardens, where our guide bid us farewell. I thanked her sincerely for everything she pointed out, and all the facts, figures, information, and insights she provided. All in all, another very interesting Hudson Valley day.

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