

The Restoration of Varina's Garden at Beauvoir

Statement of Significance -- March 21, 2013

Soon after Jefferson Davis acquired Beauvoir in 1879, the Davis' set about expanding the already beautifully developed grounds of the estate. Varina Howell Davis (Mrs. Jefferson Davis) was obviously very pleased with Beauvoir, but was particularly proud of the new garden she created. In a February 29, 1880 letter written to her daughter Winnie, who was in school in Europe, Varina stated, "...I work very hard in my garden as it is new, and quite large. I think about 2 acres...."

In this and subsequent letters she wrote over the next few months, Mrs. Davis described in both words and sketches the lay-out of the garden and the great variety of flowers, fruits and vegetables she planted. Her kitchen garden produced items for her table such as strawberries, artichokes, radishes, peppers, eggplants, Irish potatoes, and asparagus. There were both common and exotic fruit-bearing trees, including oranges, citrons, figs, peaches, apples, pears, quince, pomegranate, and jujube. Flowers and fragrant flowering shrubs abounded-- gardenias, jasmine, anemones, gladiolus, Japan lilies, St. Joseph lilies, fire lilies, and mignonette. Roses, however, were the star attraction of her circular flower garden, and Varina collected and cultivated cuttings of many different varieties.

When Mrs. Davis left Beauvoir following her husband's death in 1889, her lovely gardens slowly fell into neglect. The remnants of them were largely eradicated by Hurricane Katrina. Although over the years various efforts have been made to restore the gardens, until now no comprehensive restoration has been attempted. The present project to restore Varina's renowned gardens at Beauvoir is the result of several years of exhaustive research and study and is funded by grants from the Mississippi Dept. of Archives and History and the National Park Service. Reconstruction of visitor walkways and fences destroyed by Katrina are being funded by FEMA.

As the Beauvoir estate is a National Historic Landmark, designated by the Secretary of the Interior, it is very important to preserve both the main house and its historic landscape setting. Restoration of Varina's garden will not only reestablish a significant historic feature of Beauvoir's landscape, it will also provide an important attraction for the Gulf Coast's heritage tourism industry. Just as the gardens brought much joy to the Davis' and their guests in the late-19th-century, the restored garden will, no doubt, continue to bring beauty and enjoyment to future generations of Mississippi families and visitors to our state.

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