

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 6, 2006

Esther Marshall's Rock Gardens at Auburn Heights: In the early 1930s, Esther Marshall (my mother) was infatuated with rock gardens. Mrs. J. Walker Hoopes had a beautiful one along Route 82, just below Mount Cuba, which was in full view coming out from Wilmington. Along the south side of Auburn Heights, the lawn had been terraced near the back door (perhaps in 1897), with a sharp but short drop from this terrace to the larger lawn below. This seemed an ideal place for a small rock garden. So, some large rocks were brought in, two sets of rock steps descended the slope, and the areas between were planted with all sorts of flowering shrubs and perennials. My father installed an irrigation system along the length of this small garden, using horizontal sections of galvanized pipe drilled with many small holes to create a fountain effect while watering.

While this garden was kept up for many years, it was not enough. On a slope at the north end of the Auburn Heights property and facing the house, a much larger rock garden was planned. The present pond and its retaining embankment beyond now hide this slope from the rest of the property. Comprising about 12,000 square feet on a bank immediately above the mill race, it had not only many large rocks but a stone terrace on the race bank, a small pond and a larger one, both fed by running water down a jagged stone spillway and an ornate Japanese-style arched bridge across the race. It was full of not only perennials but low shrubs, yews, and the like, and it made quite a show in the springtime. Several walkways and stone steps allowed visitors to walk through the garden, and vehicles would often stop on Creek Road just above to look down upon it.

To pump water through the rock garden, my father submerged an intake box below the surface of the mill race and piped water from here to a pit dug in the meadow below. The pit housed three hydraulic rams that pumped water to a basin at the highest part of the garden, from which it flowed down the circuitous spillway and through the ponds back to the race. The rams worked well but frequently got choked with mud, at which time they would stop. It was often my job to start them again with a long pole from the surface of the meadow to a plunger atop each ram. In the spring of 1938, an overshot water wheel, placed alongside a tiny stone building housing a water pump near the far side of the race, was built to replace the rams. The rock garden was kept in a pristine condition until the advent of World War II, when a shortage of help allowed it to become overgrown and unkempt. It was never revived after the war, and about 1970 the rocks were plowed under and the area seeded. The bridge over the race, built at the location of the old trolley stop (but not the same bridge as in "trolley days") was removed about the same time.