

AHS 80th Anniversary: 1922–2002

≈ AHS Retrospective ≈

A HOME AT RIVER FARM (1973–1987)

AFTER 51 years of existing out of cramped second-floor offices and borrowed facilities, the American Horticultural Society finally secured a permanent national headquarters in 1973. Located just north of Mount Vernon on the George Washington Parkway in Virginia, River Farm was not only a storied property, having once been part of the holdings of George Washington, but a beautiful site, with formal gardens, mature trees, and a meadow sloping down to the Potomac River.

River Farm was secured through the generosity of philanthropist Enid A. Haupt, who provided \$1 million from her charitable trust to purchase the property for the Society. It also occurred as the result of an odd twist of fate. When the 25-acre estate, then owned by the Matheson family, came on the market in 1971, the Soviet Union offered to buy it for use as a retreat for its Embassy staff.

The prospect, during the height of the Cold War, of George Washington's farm becoming the possession of the Soviet Union led to a public outcry. Even though the U.S. State Department vetoed the sale to the Soviet Embassy, Haupt, who was at the time secretary of the AHS Board, decided that the property needed to be preserved from developers.

On a glorious first of May, 1974, some 500 guests attended the headquarters' formal opening ceremonies. Among the luminaries present was First Lady Patricia Nixon, as well as Haupt and AHS President David Leach. The presence of antique coach-and-fours, the Mount Vernon Guard dressed in colonial attire, and the U.S. Marine Corps Band gave a colorful and symbolic feel to the historic occasion.

A BOOST TO MEMBERSHIP

The acquisition of River Farm and the publicity it generated gave an immediate boost to AHS programs and membership. The Society's October 1974 Horticultural Congress in Washington, D.C., was its most successful ever, with more than 600 attendees. And membership doubled between 1972 and 1974, reaching 22,500.

When Leach stepped down as president in 1974, H. Marc Cathey—then chief of the Ornamentals Laboratory at the USDA's



First Lady Patricia Nixon arrives at AHS headquarters opening ceremonies in a horse-drawn coach in May 1974.

Beltsville, Maryland, facility—took over as 23rd president. Cathey and succeeding presidents Gilbert Daniels, Edward Dane, and Everitt Miller continued work on AHS programs such as the Plant Sciences Data Center—which was collecting and publishing data on plants located at major botanical gardens and arboreta in North America—the annual Seed Exchange, a travel program, and national awards.

DESTRUCTION AND CREATION

As the 1970s came to a close, Hurricane David visited River Farm in September

AHS Presidents 1973–1987

David G. Leach (1970–1974)
H. Marc Cathey (1974–78)
Gilbert Daniels (1978–1982)
Edward Dane (1982–1986)
Everitt L. Miller (1986–87)

1979, downing 31 mature trees and damaging more than 50 others. In addition, many recently established garden areas were affected and plans for new gardens had to be temporarily put on hold.

Despite this setback, River Farm continued to bloom. In the summer of 1981, the Society created a children's garden based on an idea proposed and supported by Board member Julia Rappaport. This garden was the precursor to the more extensive children's gardens created in 1993.

PUBLICATIONS

In November 1980, the Society's bimonthly newsletter "News & Views" was renamed *American Horticulturist* to match the title of the bimonthly four-color magazine. The newsletter offered information about Society activities in horticultural research, while the magazine covered broader gardening topics of interest to an increasingly diverse membership. "We were trying to make the publication as accessible to a popular audience as possible," says former president Gilbert Daniels, now living in Indianapolis.

The Society also issued a new edition of its popular *North American Horticulture: A Reference Guide* in 1982, which listed all horticultural organizations and programs in North America.

In 1983, the Society launched its Horticultural Internship program, which debuted with four interns. The internships were funded, as they are today, by membership donations specifically pledged to the internship program.

Next issue: *The election of AHS's first woman president sets the stage for the 1990s and beyond.*