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## Urbanization and the Historic Home & Garden

Arthur and Ninah Cummer created a legacy in urban Jacksonville, Florida long before the inception of the Cummer Museum and Gardens in 1961. The museum, built on the site of the demolished home of the Cummers, has gone through several iterations in its history. A feather in the cap of the museum is certainly the two and a half acres of gardens created by such figures as Ossian Cole Simonds and the Olmsted firm. These gardens have also experienced a decline and subsequent renaissance over the last century, culminating with a place on the National Register of Historic Places. A recent natural disaster decimated the gardens, leading to a necessary question: how will the museum change without this essential element?

Arthur Cummer was a successful lumber baron at the turn of the twentieth century. He and his wife, Ninah, settled alongside his parents, as well as his brother and sister-in-law on the left bank of the St. Johns River in the Riverside neighborhood of Jacksonville. Each household had a stately home built and Ninah was able to indulge in gardening. This led to the employment of Ossian Cole Simonds as the initial landscape architect for the Cummers in 1903. From this early time, both the estates of the Cummer families and the city of Jacksonville transformed. After the deaths of the elder Cummers, Arthur's brother Waldo and his wife Clara inherited the bulk of their estate. The Olmsted Brothers firm in New York created a new garden space upon this new land. Arthur and Ninah also employed Ellen Biddle Shipman to create an Italian garden

on the property they inherited from his parents in 1931. While the gardens remained in their entirety for several decades, in time all the homes were razed to make way for the building of the Cummer Art Museum. In Ninah Cummer's will, she expressed this sentiment to the people of Jacksonville:

Naturally no civic undertaking can function adequately without the interest and support of the community in which it is located. Therefore it is hoped that there may be additions to the Foundation from time to time so that this Museum may rank favorably with those established in other cities in the United States during the last few decades... I express the profound wish that life may be fine to my fellow citizens.<sup>1</sup>

The area surrounding the current museum site has changed drastically over the last century. From 1900 to 2014, the population of Jacksonville increased thirtyfold.<sup>2</sup> In 1901, a devastating fire destroyed much of the downtown area. The deepening of the St. Johns River and the expansion of several railroad lines in the early years of the twentieth century provided a boon to the local economy. Streetcar lines and suburbs spouted up outside of the downtown perimeter, as well as skyscrapers and vital services like hospitals and schools. All these factors (and others) coalesced into a thriving, growing city.

The changing landscape of the Cummer estates and the city of Jacksonville have run parallel to one another over the last century. I argue that the urbanization of the area surrounding the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens has provided both positive and negative impacts to its site. I further pose the question raised above: how will an art museum and garden endure without the garden?

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<sup>1</sup> Tania June Sammons, "'A Vital and Integral Part of Society:’ Women Patrons of the Arts in the South,” *Aurora, The Journal of the History of Art*, 2003, 192.

<sup>2</sup> “Jacksonville, FL Population,” accessed October 11, 2017, <http://population.us/fl/jacksonville/>.

## The Changing Urbanity of the City of Jacksonville

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1901, one of the most destructive fires in American history occurred in the city of Jacksonville. Flames from the fire could be seen as far away as Raleigh, North Carolina and Key West, Florida. The fire decimated the urban core of Jacksonville, destroying more than 2,000 buildings and leaving nearly a third of the population homeless.<sup>3</sup> The Great Fire, as it was later named, shifted the populace from downtown to the suburban areas, as many families chose to rebuild their homes in neighborhoods like Riverside and Avondale. These upscale suburban neighborhoods had largely escaped damage from the Great Fire. Both communities benefitted from a building boom in the years following the disaster. As Wayne Wood says in *The Living Heritage of Riverside & Avondale*, “Riverside's growth accelerated rapidly from the time of the fire until World War I, with development advancing southward parallel to the river. In most cases construction first occurred on the land within a few blocks of the river, with large homes built by prominent citizens on the riverfront lots. Houses gradually filled in the land further away from the river, with their size and cost generally declining with their distance away from Riverside Avenue.” The inclusion of the neighborhoods on the trolley line aided in the boom. An electrified system replaced a mule-drawn street car system at the turn of the century, allowing for a shortened commute into the business district.<sup>4</sup> Wood also includes an anecdote about the addition and proliferation of parks into the growing suburban Riverside; a 14-acre Riverside Park was created by civic leaders in the mid-1890s, but the entire park needed to be fenced in, to keep out roaming cattle.

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Wood, *The Living Heritage of Riverside & Avondale* (Riverside Avondale Preservation, Inc., 1994), 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

The revitalization of the city of Jacksonville was not confined to the suburbs. James Crooks explains in his article “Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida: 1900-1910” that the rebuilding also occurred in the urban core. Churches, banks, and various civic buildings all began the rebuilding process shortly after the Great Fire. As Crooks recounts, “the city grew both outward and upward.”<sup>5</sup> Skyscrapers became a new sight to the Jacksonville skyline, the first being the Dyal-Upchurch Building designed by the architect Henry Klutho later that same year, in August 1901.<sup>6</sup> The expansion of the railroad systems and the deepening of the St. Johns River also demonstrated a marked impact on the Jacksonville economy. The Seaboard Air railway initially served the town in 1900, and four additional railways would add Jacksonville to their railway systems within the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Dredging the channel of the river allowed for larger commercial vessels to sail down the St. Johns and established a Jacksonville port, increasing the import/export cash flow nearly twelvefold in just a few years.<sup>8</sup> Both of these modernizations greatly increased the trade by land and sea, turning Jacksonville into an commercial boomtown.

### **The Cummer Family and their Lasting Legacy**

“Only ten years after the fire, it [Riverside] was the undisputed residential showplace of the city. Over fifty elegant mansions lined Riverside Avenue, and some referred to it as ‘one of the most beautiful streets in America.’”<sup>9</sup> The Cummer Compound was included in this collection of lavish homes. Wellington Cummer built an impressive estate and his two sons, Arthur and

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<sup>5</sup> James B. Crooks, “Changing Face of Jacksonville, Florida: 1900-1910,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (1984): 442.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 444.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 443–44.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, *The Living Heritage of Riverside & Avondale*, 6–8.

Waldo, had homes built on either side of the central manse, thus making up the compound. The Cummers, who moved their lumber business to Jacksonville from Michigan in the 1890s, saw the business grow as Jacksonville rebuilt after the Great Fire. They flourished in the burgeoning town of Jacksonville alongside their neighborhood of Riverside. The wives of the Cummer men would prove to be the civic and landscape leaders within the Cummer Compound, leaving an eternal legacy of the Cummer name in what would become the heart of Jacksonville.

Wellington and Ada Cummer, as well as Arthur and Ninah, had initial work done on the grounds of their part of the compound by Ossian Cole Simonds in 1903.<sup>10</sup> He favored a regional planting style, one that incorporated native plants in natural, less formal, groupings and drew inspiration from traditional English gardens. Judith Tankard refers to this original planning and implementation of the gardens by Simonds as “laying the groundwork” for what was to come.<sup>11</sup> The younger Cummers added additional trees and shrubbery to their gardens just seven years later under the advice of a nursery from Philadelphia, Thomas Meehan and Sons. A wisteria arbor was added in this second phase of the garden, used as a framing device to ornament the St. Johns River at the terminus of the garden. This garden would eventually become known as the English Garden in the modern era but was alternately known as the Wisteria Garden and the Azalea Garden during Ninah Cummer’s lifetime.<sup>12</sup>

The death of Ada Cummer in 1929 led to a restructuring of the Cummer family property. Her home was demolished, and the property divided between the two Cummer brothers living on either side and a sister who lived off property. This allowed Waldo and Clara Cummer

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<sup>10</sup> Judith B Tankard and Michael Hales, *A Legacy in Bloom: Celebrating a Century of Gardens at the Cummer* (Jacksonville, Fla.: Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, 2008), 10–12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

to expand their property by taking in the remaining gardens belonging to the elder Cummers (now both deceased) and expanding their existing greenspace. In 1931, they chose to employ William Lyman Phillips of the famed Olmsted firm to design their new gardens. His task was to incorporate the pre-existing gardens of Ada's time with new ideas for the pristine expanse of space created from the demolition of the elder Cummers' home. This involved the building of a pool, a greenhouse, and myriad new plantings, which culminated in a 1950 newspaper article describing the garden as "containing specimens of virtually every plant indigenous to the North Florida area."<sup>13</sup>

Arthur and Ninah Cummer's property also benefitted from the dissolution of the elder Cummers' land. While Waldo and Clara received the lion's share of the space, the new acquisition lined up perfectly with a trip to Italy for Arthur and Ninah. As they explored the grounds of the Villa Gamberaia, located just outside of Florence, they gathered inspiration for their most ambitious undertaking yet: the Italian Garden. This garden was realized by the landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman in 1931, around the same time Phillips from the Olmsted firm was designing and implementing Waldo and Clara's new garden space.<sup>14</sup> Shipman's initial plan proved to be too ambitious, with multiple pools and fountains that were ultimately cut due to complexity and cost. Two long pools stayed from the original plans, and many of Ninah's beloved azaleas were included in the planting design (fig. 1).

Arthur and Ninah Cummer participated in many civic and cultural activities in the blossoming city of Jacksonville. Arthur served as a member of the Chamber of Commerce for the city, while Ninah volunteered for disaster relief both after the Great Fire in Jacksonville and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 23–24.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24–26.

as a Red Cross volunteer during the first World War.<sup>15</sup> She also created the first Garden Club of Jacksonville in the 1920s, and served on several civic advisory boards, such as chairman of the Park Advisory Committee of the City Commission of Jacksonville and president of the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs.<sup>16</sup> As they aged, the Cummers sought to leave a legacy to the city that they watched and helped grow over the span of many decades. Upon the death of Ninah (Arthur preceded her in death by fifteen years), her will established the DeEtte Holden Cummer Museum Foundation.<sup>17</sup> Ninah bequeathed the land, the house, an art collection of around sixty pieces, and a sizeable part of her fortune to the foundation as an endowment for the creation of an art museum.

### **The Everchanging Cummer Museum and Gardens**

After the death of Ninah Cummer in 1958, the DeEtte Holden Cummer Museum Foundation moved forward with the creation of the museum. The home of the Cummers was deemed unsuitable for an art museum and was razed soon after Ninah's death. The Foundation commissioned architect Harold Saxelbye to design the current museum building, which opened to the public on November 11, 1961. A small piece of the Cummer home was preserved, however. Called the "Tillman Tudor Room" or the "Cummer Family Parlor" on the Museum visitor's guide, this space houses some of the original furnishings and finishes of Arthur and Ninah's sitting room.<sup>18</sup> Thirty years after the opening of the museum, two gallery spaces were added on to the existing building on the east façade, looking out towards the gardens and beyond,

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<sup>15</sup> Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens and Tanja Jones, *The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens* (Jacksonville, FL: Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, 2000), 6–7.

<sup>16</sup> Tankard and Hales, *A Legacy in Bloom*, 38–43.

<sup>17</sup> Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens and Jones, *The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens*, 6. The name of the foundation refers to the young daughter they lost in infancy in 1909. They had no other children, but devoted themselves to civic and charitable engagement for the betterment of Jacksonville.

<sup>18</sup> "Cummer Museum," accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.cummERMuseum.org/>.

to the St. Johns River.<sup>19</sup> An adjacent building was purchased in 1990 in order to house the Art Connections Interactive Center, which provides art education to visitors of the Cummer Museum.<sup>20</sup>

The fate of Waldo and Clara Cummer's section of the estate has a more mixed outcome. Waldo died in the 1930s, while Clara lived another twenty-two years, dying the same year as Ninah, in 1958. The property was sold; "half was purchased by the Barnett Insurance Co., which paved over some of the Olmsted Garden for parking and used the rest as an employee recreation area, installing shuffleboard courts and picnic tables. The other half of the property now houses the Red Cross."<sup>21</sup> According to the Museum's website, the Olmsted Garden was purchased by the museum in 1992, and an extensive restoration project began. The process relied heavily on archival documentation from the Olmsted firm and the Cummer family photographs and archives.<sup>22</sup> The restoration was completed in 2013, and the Olmsted Garden was reopened to the public.

Former Director of the Museum Maarten van de Guchte stated in the foreword to Judith Tankard's book *A Legacy in Bloom*, that "the gardens are integral to the full aesthetic experience of visiting the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens".<sup>23</sup> He also refers to the gardens as works of living, albeit fragile, art. The biggest challenge for a museum with gardens, therefore, is preservation and maintenance of a work of art that is constantly exposed to the elements. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in the Italian Garden. Arthur and Ninah Cummer sacrificed

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<sup>19</sup> Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens and Jones, *The Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens*, 6–7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Charlie Patton, "Recapturing a Picture of Scenic History; Closed to the Public and Languishing for Decades, the Olmsted Garden to Reopen," *The Florida Times Union*, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> "Cummer Museum."

<sup>23</sup> Tankard and Hales, *A Legacy in Bloom*, 6.

a garage and a greenhouse in order to realize Ninah’s dream of an Italianate villa garden on the banks of the St. Johns River in Jacksonville. Combining Shipman’s vision of the Villa Gamberaia and Ninah’s love of azaleas with the existing garden space and land reclaimed from the demolition work, the Italian Garden provides a stunning vista from the rear of the art museum. Ninah Cummer took great care with her gardens during the prime of her life, yet as Tankard points out in her book, “during Ninah’s final years, when she was infirm, the plantings in both the Italian Garden and the English Garden were greatly simplified.”<sup>24</sup> The plantings appear to have deteriorated even further after Ninah’s death, “the garden was a mere shadow of its glorious earlier years, with scarcely any of Ninah’s favorite flowers in residence.”<sup>25</sup> Even the barest of facts about the garden were thought to be lost to time, including the name of the landscape architect who designed it. The mid- to late-1990s saw a resurgence of interest and information in the gardens, starting with the renaming of the museum to the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens. This renaissance included the rediscovery of Ellen Biddle Shipman’s role in the design of the Italian Garden, as well as the restoration and preservation of the Italian and Olmsted Gardens.<sup>26</sup> The gardens themselves were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2011.<sup>27</sup>

Alas, this revival may have reached its zenith. As Tankard notes in *A Legacy in Bloom*, Ninah continually had difficulty with her azaleas thriving in the gardens because of environmental conditions. The “proximity to the brackish river water that rises above the bulkhead wall in storms” made more temperamental plant life difficult to grow on the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 30–31.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>26</sup> Caroline Seebohm and Curtice Taylor, *Rescuing Eden: Preserving America’s Historic Gardens* (New York, New York: Monacelli Press, 2015), 66–67.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 67.

compound.<sup>28</sup> This idea seems especially poignant when considering the disastrous storm surge resulting from Hurricane Irma in September 2017 (fig. 2). The Gardens were submerged for more than twenty-four hours in brackish water, according to the Museum’s website, “resulting in the uprooting of plants, detached railing along the river, broken lighting, pervasive salinization of the soil, large amounts of debris, and significant impact to much of the physical infrastructure, including drainage, electric, fencing, and the well that services the landscape.”<sup>29</sup> This has caused an immediate and prolonged shutdown of the Gardens, with the upper tiers only being reopened after nearly two months. The soil remains hostile to plant life, and specific breeds of azaleas unique to the Cummer Gardens have been lost.<sup>30</sup> In the last decade, more than a million dollars has gone towards garden restoration and improvement, fully underscoring van de Guchte’s sentiment that these gardens are fragile, living works of art (fig 3).

What does the future hold for the Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens? How will they stay relevant within the everchanging urban core of Jacksonville, especially with such a difficult loss of their Gardens? That is not an easily answered question. The Cummer legacy has endured through the Great Fire of 1901, two World Wars, and various other major world and local events. The estate has ebbed and flowed in its success as an emblem to the Cummer namesake, yet the synthesis of the Cummer name with the Riverside and Avondale neighborhoods may be the key to ensuring its longevity. The neighborhoods have combined to form a revitalization project, ostensibly to reinvigorate them, to encourage a renaissance not unlike the one achieved by the Cummer Museum.<sup>31</sup> The city of Jacksonville is dynamic,<sup>31</sup> and continuously growing, as Crooks

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<sup>28</sup> Tankard and Hales, *A Legacy in Bloom*, 29–31.

<sup>29</sup> “Cummer Museum.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> “Riverside Avondale Preservation,” Riverside Avondale Preservation, accessed November 21, 2017, <http://riversideavondale.org/>.

said, “both outward and upward.” It is the largest city in the continental United States, based on square footage.<sup>32</sup> It would be understandable, even expected, for the Cummer Museum and Gardens to be consumed by such a large space and completely forgotten. Yet, it has remained.

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<sup>32</sup> “Facts & History About Jacksonville, Florida - Visit Jacksonville,” accessed November 21, 2017, <https://www.visitjacksonville.com/media/fast-facts/>.

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## Images



Figure 1. The Italian Garden c.1937 and 2003. Images taken from Judith Tankard's article "Splendor Restored."



Figure 2. The Italian Garden c.2010s and September 2017. Images taken from the Cummer Museum website.



Figure 3. The Italian Garden November 2017. Image taken from Cummer Museum November newsletter.