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Lund, Michael and Orth, Geoffrey, "From the White House to Our House: The Story of an Honors College Vegetable Garden" (2010). *Honors in Practice -- Online Archive*. 123.

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From the White House to Our House: The Story of an Honors College Vegetable Garden

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When Virginia Governor Timothy M. Kaine announced in December 2008 his “Renew Virginia” initiative for the Commonwealth, state agencies responded with their own programs “promoting renewable energy, creating green jobs, and encouraging preservation of the environment.” At Longwood University in Farmville, a state-assisted co-educational comprehensive institution, the Cormier Honors College for Citizen Scholars proposed a rooftop vegetable garden on its newly renovated honors residence hall to address these issues. The university’s signature “Citizen Leader” program would be enhanced by a working garden that demonstrates to those on campus and in the larger community the advantages of organic farming, composting, rain water usage, and other important sustainability principles. It would also allow hands-on learning consistent with honors pedagogy. Putting the garden on top of a building would provide exciting promotional material and stress the application of such programs even in urban environments. What was first viewed as a setback—the university’s initial rejection of the plan—led to the discovery of a compelling piece of history that made the garden project distinctive. Furthermore, this discovery institutionalized an example of the “place as text” focus in honors programs throughout the country.

To give added strength to their initial proposal, the honors staff linked their effort to President and Michelle Obama’s decision to establish the first vegetable garden on the White House grounds since Eleanor Roosevelt’s World War II Victory Garden of 1943. The connection to this presidential initiative and to history was particularly important to the mission of Longwood’s Honors College for Citizen Leadership, a program designed to meet the needs of academically gifted undergraduate students by offering challenging courses that enable them to expand their intellectual horizons. In keeping with the university’s mission, the honors college strives to develop citizens who use their learning to provide service to their community. This linking of citizenship and learning is the hallmark of honors at Longwood.

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The unexpected and severe economic downturn of 2009, the growing awareness of the importance of preserving the environment, and the strain of rapidly increasing global populations have made many believe that a coordinated national effort like that which sustained the country during wartime is needed now. Indeed, the garden could create opportunities to highlight or discuss what may be radical differences between World War II's sense of shared national purpose and the situation brought about by today's War on Terror, which many think is creating an unacceptable level of sacrifice from military families. Many Americans, as well as most of our students, do not have family members and friends serving in the war and are therefore even further removed from a first-hand understanding of such sacrifice. As Kristin Henderson writes in *While They're at War: The True Story of American Families on the Homefront*,

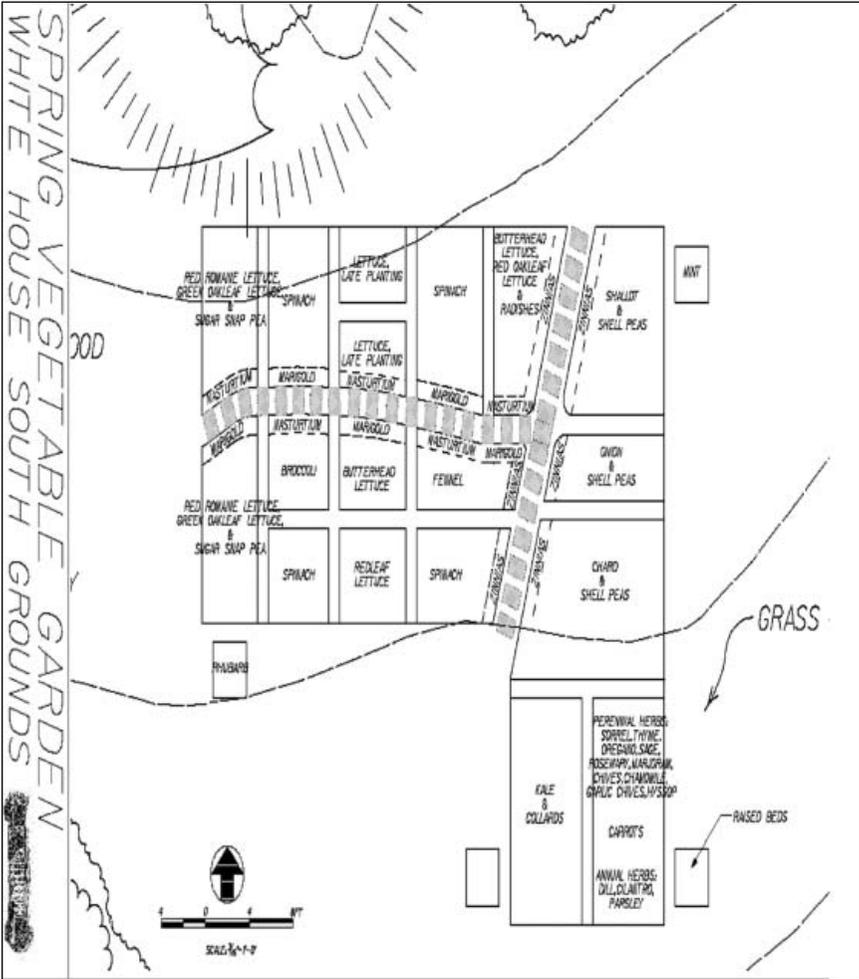
In a country of nearly three hundred million people only two and a half million serve in the armed forces . . . A year after the Iraq War started, if you looked at the people who were laying down their lives for the country . . . you found yourself looking across America at small rural towns, at decaying urban cores and close-in suburbs, past their prime, and at minority and immigrant communities. . . . Virtually none of those who serve come from America's elite classes: business executives, politicians, academics and celebrities—their children do not join the military. (4)

These “children [who] do not join the military” generally attend college, and they need to consider whether the United States now has a shared national purpose. In establishing the White House Garden based on the heritage of the World War II Victory Garden, Michelle Obama made specific reference to the shared goals that the garden would represent. The honors college thus proposed to copy, in as much detail as possible, the layout and planting guide available on the White House website (see Figure 1) in order to encourage discussion of a national shared purpose on our campus.

Our goals would match many of the White House's stated objectives: to focus attention on diet and nutrition, to explore the advantages of locally grown produce, to realize the potential of community gardening, and to promote sustainability by using organic farming methods and careful management of natural resources (“A Healthy Harvest”). Because one of Longwood's traditional strengths has been the preparation of elementary and secondary school teachers, a campus garden would also prepare undergraduates to follow the First Lady's example of giving school children hands-on experience in the fundamental and universal human task of raising food. Connecting student labor in the garden with local organizations involved in the production and distribution of food, the project would encourage recognition of the interrelated dependencies of different segments of our population.

In the documentation accompanying the proposal submitted to the university's Space Planning Committee, the honors staff explained:

Figure 1: White House Garden Layout and Planting Guide



In addition to providing fresh fruits, herbs, vegetables, and flowers, the Cormier Honors College Vegetable Garden (CHCVG) has educational components for the students who plant it, harvest it, and cook it. Among them are:

1. Fundamental principles of botany and agriculture;
2. Education on matters of health related to poor diet, such as obesity and diabetes, and their relationship to food produced for mass consumption, especially for the fast food industry;
3. Political and historical connections found in contextualizing such an effort within a post-industrial society;

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4. Communications challenges in the electronic age encountered in documenting the project's development and finding media outlets to expand its effect (hence the need for a video camera);
5. Community relations, as some garden produce could be donated to FACES, the local food bank, but cooperating also with the local Farmers' Market;
6. Business dynamics underscored by investments in capital and labor in relation to profit and loss and recorded in expenses, profit (based on grocery store prices).

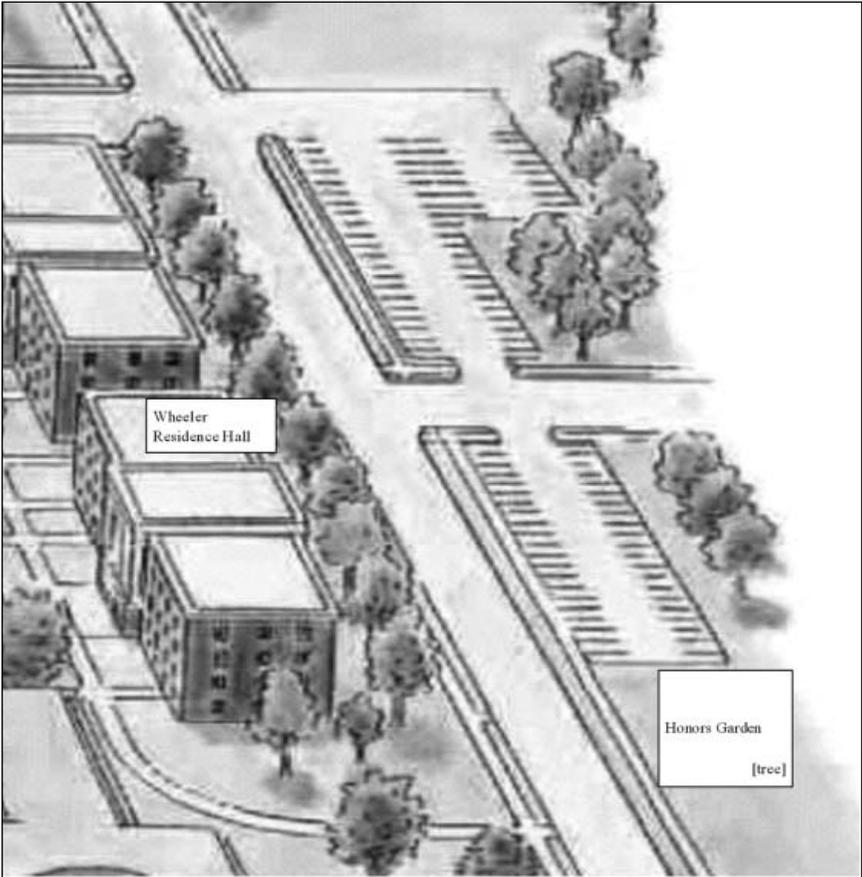
An additional strength of the proposal was that, if space were available, very little initial funding would be needed to begin the project: the university had basic tools that could be borrowed, and the White House's initial outlay for seeds was estimated at \$200.00.

However, Longwood University concerns about a rooftop garden—based primarily on liability and structural issues—led to an early defeat for the Cormier Honors College for Citizen Scholars Vegetable Garden. The staff decided not to abandon the idea, however. They conducted a survey of the grounds close to Wheeler Residence Hall for an acceptable garden site. Fortunately, one was found behind the building and across one street, Griffin Boulevard, where there were established walkways to a parking lot. At the north end of that space was a grassy plot approximately the same size as the White House garden; and the honors college requested that that space be allocated for a vegetable garden (see Figure 2; Wheeler Residence Hall is at the bottom left of the drawing).

Even the drainage from the parking lot could be made an advantage with this site, as the honors college would be able to propose landscaping to control runoff, improve the watershed, and explore possible water storage systems for irrigation use.

When the honors staff sat down with the Space Planning Committee to discuss the potential for this site, they received even better news than they anticipated: the site could be approved for their use, and they were told that the large Southern Magnolia tree on the edge of this plot had come from the White House, something very few people on campus knew. The "place as text" principle the honors staff had used with students at such places as nearby Appomattox State Park was suddenly evident in this project. The professors on the committee found themselves asking the same basic questions Bernice Braid articulated in her honors classes: "how [did] people who live here transform the space they occup[ied] into the place in which they live[d]. And equally important: what is it about how I myself observe them that shapes my conclusions?" (15). The people who planted this magnolia shaped their lives within the context of slavery, Reconstruction, and a long struggle for civil rights. A working garden on this plot would have educational potential not only for the study of

Figure 2: Wheeler Hall across Griffin Blvd. from the Honors Garden



such logical subjects as plants, water usage, and food production but also for the study of American history. The shape of the past could be dramatically understood by students and other visitors standing on this piece of ground.

The honors staff was first referred to a recent online article by retired Longwood faculty member Edna Allen Dean, who had researched the history of the magnolia for the Remarkable Trees of Virginia project:

A few yards from the corner of Griffin Boulevard and High Street stand two beautiful magnolia trees. Only a few people in the Farmville area know that these trees came from the grounds of the White House during the administration of President William McKinley. Robert Evans, formerly of Farmville, Virginia, was a groundskeeper at the White House. Evans was the son of a Reconstruction legislator, William D. Evans, and a relative of Reconstruction state senator J.W.D. Bland. One day around the

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year 1898, Evans was probably told to prune a magnolia tree on the grounds. As he prepared to dispose of the cuttings, he decided to save a few branches as gifts for some of his relatives in Farmville, hoping that the branches would become trees. Seven of these branches did become trees in Farmville. However, five were in the path of Longwood College expansion and only the two remain, both of which will probably meet the same fate. Robert Evans gave two of his magnolia branches to Pompey Bland, who was the brother of Senator Bland. The former had recently built a beautiful home near the corner of Griffin Blvd. and High Street. Pompey Bland planted his gift on each side of the walkway leading to his home. This information was taken from a newspaper article written by Mr. Charles White, publisher of *The Informant*. . . . Note: Mr. White interviewed five senior citizens who confirmed that the tree was planted from the McKinley White House.

That the honors college vegetable garden inspired by the White House garden had its own White House tree was a fortunate coincidence. However, further research into this site, uncovering the origin of this tree, has made the story richer and deeper, giving the garden project material for research by historians and social scientists. As Eric L. Ball and Alice Lai argue, contextualizing educational programs with an institution's locality can be an important pedagogical goal. The creation of a garden at this site provided a focal point for future Longwood students and campus visitors to learn about central issues in our national life.

In 1898 Longwood was known as the Normal School, a teacher preparation institution for women. At that time the maintenance staff and custodial staff included African-Americans, but, because of their race, they were not permitted to enroll for classes. The neighborhood across from the campus along Griffin Boulevard (then Ely Street) was populated largely by African-Americans like Pompey Bland, whose descendants would not have become Longwood students before the 1960s. To measure the gap between white and black in the community, one should note that from 1959–1964 Prince Edward County, where Farmville and Longwood are located, closed all of the public schools rather than integrate the system (see R. C. Smith). A generation of African-American young people lost its chance for education, and their children faced unusual challenges when they entered school decades later. Tension in the community was not significantly lessened by the college, which attempted to isolate itself from the issue, but in 1969 Longwood did create an integrated Campus School, grades one to seven, that was part of the slow process of healing that continues today.

Another component of Prince Edward County history that provides a backdrop for the issues raised in developing the honors college garden is the story of a free-black community that prospered just west of Farmville in the first half

of the nineteenth century. As Melvin Patrick Ely explains in *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War*, the community had its own blacksmith and other craftsmen; dairy, corn, and tobacco farms; and a general store. Black citizens of Israel Hill worked for wages comparable to whites, pursued legal redress for grievances against whites in courts, and worked and interacted socially with whites. The larger turmoil of the Civil War contributed to the dissolution of the community, but a tradition of racial cooperation had existed in Prince Edward County prior to the days in which Robert Evans brought cuttings from the White House grounds to Farmville. Longwood's honors college hopes to use its vegetable garden site to inform incoming students about this kind of local history, as many other schools are doing. Anita R. Guynn, for instance, proposes to "promote the mission" of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke by having honors students explore the community "where many area residents' surnames are the names of campus buildings, where many students have family in the area, and where many students have off-campus jobs" (33).

Longwood University is now committed to maintaining a diverse student population and has joined the Farmville-Prince Edward County community in recognizing the tragedy of past divisions. The university has participated in events such as the reenactment of a 1951 student walk-out in protest of unequal educational facilities at the black Moton High School. (The school desegregation lawsuit that resulted was part of the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation.) There are also signs on campus for the self-guided Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail of Southside Virginia. The tree at the site of the honors college for Citizen Scholars' Vegetable Garden, then, accentuates a powerful piece of American history in which the fundamental rights of citizens have been pursued over several centuries. That the honors college garden helped to institutionalize the tree's place on the college campus during the first year of President Obama's term is therefore fitting. Our web site and garden signage will be developed to complement the Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail of Southside Virginia and the nearby Moton Museum (in the old Moton High School building).

The significance and potential impact of the garden led to the honors college's receiving grant funds from the American Democracy Project at Longwood, a multi-campus initiative focused on higher education's role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. Money was given for the purchase of hand tools to work the garden, including wooden, long-handled, round-point shovels, wooden-handled garden hoes, 12-tine bow rakes, a wooden-handled garden cultivator (push plow), a 100-gallon super composter, and a video camera to record and publicize the project. Such hands-on experience, of course, is central to many honors programs (Holman, Smith, and Welch). Additional funds are being sought at Longwood so that work on the garden can be documented for distribution in a number of ways, including on-site multimedia, interactive displays. The garden has a

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developing website that includes slide shows to document the ongoing operation as well as more detailed explanation of such topics as Organic Farming, Sustainability Issues, Diet & Nutrition, the Culture of Gardens, and Citizen Leadership. Two students doing research outside of the honors college provided related material on vegetarian diets and genetically modified foods in the first semester of our work. The garden tree will be used to underscore the history of this place—its White House origin in the context of free black communities, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement.

The complexity of current political dynamics will also be highlighted by the honors college garden. The White House was lobbied by groups who believe that growing more food locally and organically can reduce reliance on huge industrial farms that use more oil for transportation and chemicals for fertilizer. On the other hand, some people believe home gardens could decrease demand for crops and have a negative effect on agriculture. Restaurant owners and workers also express worry that American families with gardens might begin to eat out less often and that their business will be harmed. Similar concerns initially led the Department of Agriculture to oppose Eleanor Roosevelt's creation of a White House Victory Garden. Debating these issues in the present context and with an awareness of history will be worthwhile for students with varied interests.

The honors staff encouraged first-year students especially to take on leadership roles with the vegetable garden. These students are required to participate in an off-campus retreat before the regular orientation begins in the fall and to live in the honors residence hall for their first year. The goal is to build the strong sense of community that has been related to improved academic performance, as Elissa Guralnick has described:

When instructors used methods such as group work, fieldwork, service learning, peer reviews, and discussion, students had opportunities to interact, and friendships were more likely to develop. With higher rates of communication and greater opportunities for peer socialization, students found they had a forum in which they could discuss college transition issues. The ongoing affiliation with a small community of peers helped many students figure out how to adapt to college and make the shift in identity from high school student to college student. (353)

While it may be difficult to trace stronger community spirit specifically to the garden alone, the staff consistently witnessed lively interaction among students from planting through the first official harvest meal.

Another objective of the Longwood Garden also relates directly to honors pedagogy. Debbie Storrs and Lysie Clott have argued that high-achieving students capable of advanced work are too often motivated less by a traditional ("liberal") desire to learn than by pursuit of a profitable career; that is, many honors students work toward an impressive résumé that increases chances of

employment and professional status rather than a desire to study and understand the world, to learn for knowledge's sake. Storrs and Clott believe, however, that "liberal" learners are more likely to become informed, active citizens, a goal often specifically cited in creating and maintaining honors programs. Because Longwood has no programs directed toward careers in agriculture, the honors college hopes that its garden can attract students who are curious about the fundamental nature of food production, who are willing to do physical labor, and who take personal satisfaction in seeing the material results of their effort more than students who see plowing, raking, and hoeing as skills to foreground at a job interview.

To develop and maintain the garden as a teaching and a research site in the future, the honors staff hopes to make appointments of student officers with specific areas of responsibility:

- **Manager:** organize work sessions for hands to till, plant, weed, harvest; ensure that the garden is maintained in a manner consistent with university grounds.
- **Finance Officer:** prepare budgets and record expenditures, including labor costs (at minimum wage), profit (at grocery store prices), seed, equipment, research.
- **Publicity Officer:** find ways to promote the project and to inform the public of the garden's benefits, including organizing tours, scheduling presentations and news releases, building a data bank that documents the garden's operation.
- **Historian:** place the current garden in our own and other historical contexts, exploring the relationship of this effort to gardens in other cultures.
- **Development Officer:** seek support to add features to the garden, such as educational placards, interactive displays, brochures, additional equipment.
- **Researcher:** explore additional resources to determine new applications, such as the use of parking lot drainage, rain barrels, varieties of insect control, organic fertilizers, bee hives, bird houses.
- **Hand(s):** assist the manager with the actual garden operation, contributing a fixed number of work hours over the course of a semester.

In the first fall semester of the project (2009), the garden was plowed, fertilized (organically), and planted. By Thanksgiving students had sufficient lettuce, spinach, kale, onions, and collards to host "The Great Green Greens Cook-off" in the kitchen of Wheeler Hall. Other parts of the garden were planted with turnips and cabbage, but the disappointing yields revealed that more soil testing and fertilizing were necessary. A number of herbs that would winter over were also well established by December, and a portion of the ground was planted in oats as a cover crop to be plowed under in the next spring. A record

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of these events was recorded by an honors student, who is one of the program's student assistants. He constructed a growing website with slide shows, samples of student writing, and links to community garden projects, organic farming operations, and related educational programs.

When students return in the spring 2010 term, the first order of business will be to work the soil much deeper, adding compost and other organic matter. In mid-February the garden—35 wide and 45 feet long (approximately the same size as the White House garden)—will be planted with the same seeds and in approximately the same pattern used by Michelle Obama last spring in the nation's capitol. Flowering plants to repel insects, such as marigolds and nasturtiums, will border the edges and walkways. Among the hopes for late spring are donating food to the local food bank, challenging chefs at local restaurants to create dishes featuring the garden produce, and staging panels to discuss issues related to nutrition, diet, and fast food.

Enlisting Longwood faculty members from other disciplines—as well as teachers in local schools—also has the potential to enlarge the project's impact across campus and in the community. Many existing courses could refer students to the garden or require they visit the site. Future research topics we hope faculty and teachers can direct students toward include processed food and health issues; the fast food industry and diet; the politics of agriculture; elementary education and sustainability; marketing in the electronic age; community relations in college towns; the psychology of gardening; gardens throughout history; gardens and art; gardens and exercise; and the economics of home gardens. In the garden's first semester, a student in an advanced general education course produced an essay on the history of victory gardens from 1600 to the present that will be added to the honors website. Such involvement of faculty and students from multiple disciplines across the university models the cooperation of different elements of the national population during wartime in the past. The honors staff hopes to further illuminate the mutual interests of our campus community as well as the larger local community by sharing the harvests in such events as a chefs' challenge hosted at a local restaurant, the distribution of food to the local food bank, and cooperation with farmers' markets. Results of student research projects will be included in our online library and made available to local libraries.

The honors staff also intends not to lose track of the fundamental fact that many students today are unfamiliar with farm work, unlike in Pompey Bland's day when over 40% of America's population lived or worked on farms (see Dimitri, Efland, and Conklin). From our initial experience with volunteers—some of whom found that using tools without gloves creates blisters; that sandals are not correct footwear for shoveling; and that you really do have to pay attention to the depth and separation of seeds when planting—we have concluded that at least one work session be required of each student!

Among the stated objectives of Longwood's honors college is “to create an academic community that is sustained through the drive and ambition of its

student members." As our students have dug, planted, weeded, and harvested, we have seen the vegetable garden and its White House tree become productive components of this effort. As more students take on such tasks, the project can become a model for honors work at other institutions.

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