



Chapter Two

Landscape Physical History

CHAPTER TWO

Landscape Physical History

Property Background and Chain of Title

The White Horticultural Park is named for its most recent owners, John C. and Margaret K. White. Located at 3301 Hawthorne Lane, the property contains approximately 13 acres. It is situated on a larger parcel of land that in the early 18th century belonged to the vast 21,000 acre estate patented by William Fitzhugh and known as “Ravensworth.” This estate was eventually divided between successive generations with a parcel comprising 2,291 acres owned by Mordecai Fitzhugh in 1783. Information regarding the property indicates that in 1760 Kitchen Prim, who owned two slaves, occupied the northeastern corner of “Ravensworth.” This was likely a tenant of the Fitzhugh family. The land was predominantly farmed through the Fitzhugh tenure.¹

In 1819, Carlise Fairfax Whiting owned 1,577 acres on Holmes Run. He willed 255 acres to his daughter Ellen M. Whiting. Little evidence exists to indicate possible features of this land except a Chancery suit brought by Mordecai Fitzhugh, owner of the property adjoining Whiting’s, against Dabney Ball, a tenant of Whiting’s, regarding placement of a fence along the property line. The fence line could be that along the line between parcel A and the rest of the Whiting property on the 1939 plat surveyed for the deed to the White property.²

Following Mordecai Fitzhugh’s land tenure, the property was frequently divided until Alfred Freeman owned a parcel consisting of 67 acres, described as “part Ravensworth.” Tax records indicate \$1,000 worth of buildings on the property. It is from this land that the 13 acres of White property derives. A 1939 survey completed for the deed transfer to John C. and Margaret White divided the property into parcels A, B and D. Parcel A is the tract from the Whiting estate and parcels C and D are from the remaining Fitzhugh estate.³

¹ Cecile Glendening, “Margaret White Horticultural Center,” memo of historical summary to Michael Rierson, February 20, 2004, 1.

² Cecile Glendening, “Margaret White Horticultural Center,” memo of historical summary to Michael Rierson, February 20, 2004, 2.

³ Cecile Glendening, “Chain of Title,” February 20, 2004. On file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

Horticultural History and Physical Development

When John and Margaret White purchased the property in 1938, it was situated in an isolated bucolic landscape dominated by a large oak tree, see Figure 2-1. The couple soon began making improvements to the property by moving a ca. 1900 dwelling across the road. This structure was located at the top of the hill, and had replaced an early residence constructed by Alfred Freeman. The Whites then contracted architect Joe Lapish to build a residence for them on the same site, and began removing 12-foot yews from around the building site and Norway maples from the property boundary. A large, enclosed porch was later constructed to replace a smaller one. It was designed to catch the summer breezes from the west and enable views onto the garden. The original dwelling which the White's moved was used as a servant's house for a couple of years, until the 1940s, after which it was locked and abandoned.⁴ This structure suffered tree damage from Hurricane Isabel in 2003 and has since been removed.

John White, a horticulture enthusiast, made cuttings of rhododendrons, among other plants, and together with his wife Margaret, developed an expansive garden. The Whites also planted several evergreens, boxwood, and rhododendrons. As Mrs. White recalls, all the boxwoods growing on the property originated from two small plants that she and J.C. purchased.⁵

In order to support their horticultural pursuits, J.C. added a greenhouse to the residence and a nearing frame in the yard, which he kept full of cuttings. John's earliest cuttings came from plants advertised in nursery catalogs in the 1960s. As Mrs. White recalls, they "never had an overall plan or garden design. It just grew over time."⁶ In the early 1970s, the Whites joined the Rhododendron Society—members of this group still continue to meet on the property.

Outbuildings on the property include a ca. 1876 barn with a stone foundation—possibly quarried on the premises from a rock outcrop that forms a small hill near the residence. This structure was eventually renovated by the Whites for their children to play in. An older structure, known as the Chicken House or the Tool House, is located nearby, as is a small shed-like structure referred to as the "Camellia House," which the White's used to winter their camellias. During their ownership of the property, the Whites raised chickens and pigs. Mrs. White also maintained a large vegetable garden south of the barn.⁷

⁴ Fairfax County Park Authority, General Management Plan: John C. and Margaret K. White Horticultural Park, draft. On file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

⁵ Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed, June 15, 2001, on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

⁶ Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed June 15, 2001, on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives.

⁷ Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed June 15, 2001, on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives.

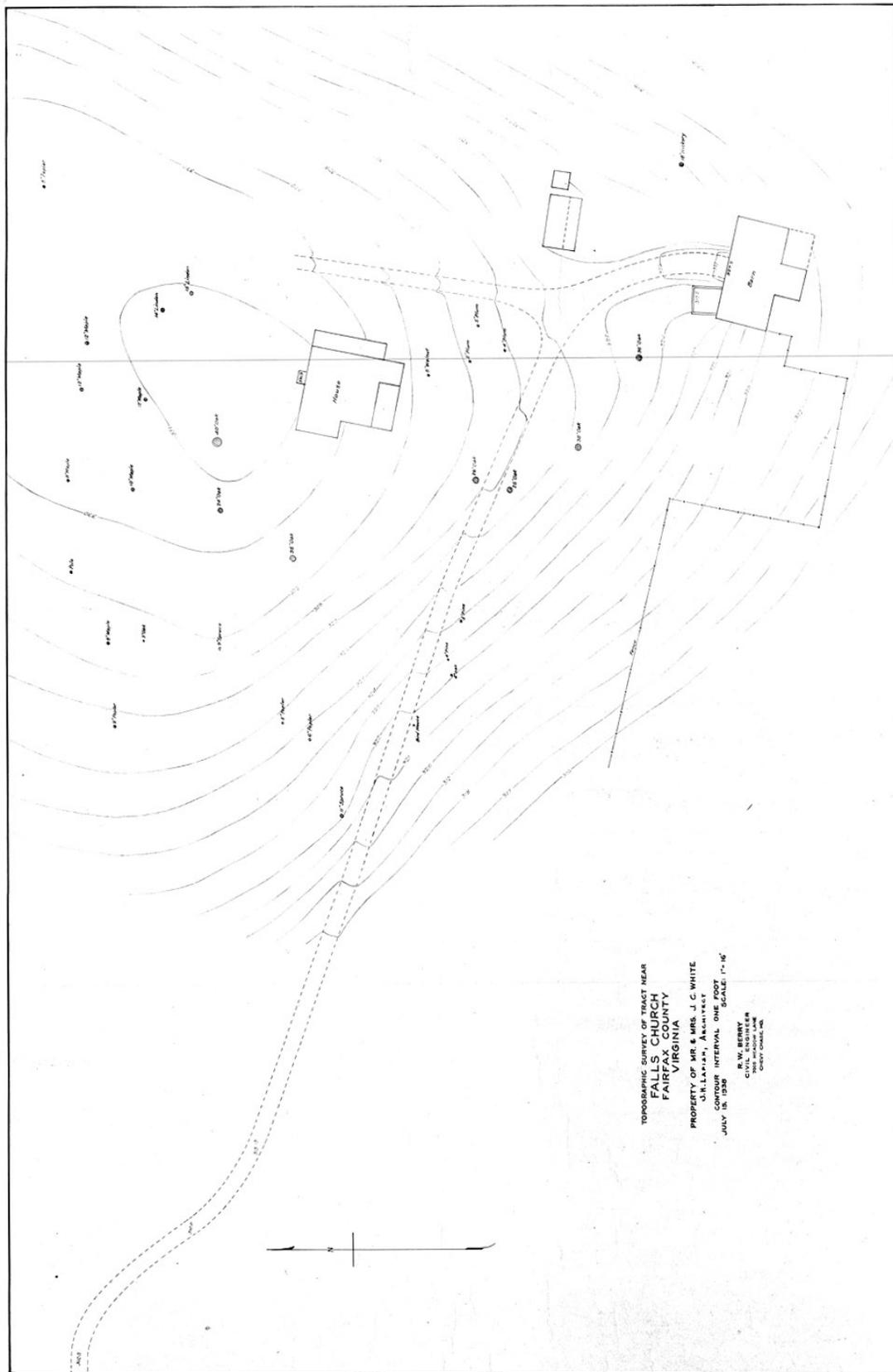


Figure 2: 1938 Survey of White property showing location of buildings, topography, fences, access drive, fences, and trees.

Source: R.W. Berry, C.E. *Topographic Survey of Tract Near Falls Church, Virginia: Property of Mr. & Mrs. J.C. White.* J.H. Lapisch, Architect 1:16. July 15, 1938. (Chevy Chase, MD).

Looking to have a water feature on the property, the Whites dug out a small pond at the location of a natural spring in the southeast corner of the property. Here they planted many wildflowers and ferns. While the ferns remain, the wildflowers have since disappeared. A small stream, once located at the edge of the property, has also disappeared due to encroaching subdivision of the surrounding lands.⁸

North of the house, a road remnant connected Annandale and Sleepy Hollow Road. Mrs. White believes that Mr. Freeman (the previous owner) tired of the traffic at his back door, so he bought the triangle of land north of the house and made a right-of-way along it that went to Sleepy Hollow Road. Mrs. White believes that some maples remain in the woodland to indicate its historic alignment.⁹

After WWII, development on land surrounding the White property increased dramatically. Predominantly farmland interspersed with a few houses, the rural context quickly evolved into a suburban landscape. Along with this encroachment of post-WWII development, the White property address was changed from Annandale Road to Princess Anne Lane. Margaret White, fighting to hold onto the pastoral idyll she and her husband had created, received permission to name the right-of-way along the edge of the property and use that as her address—Hawthorne Lane.¹⁰

When John died he left several rhododendrons and some azaleas waiting to be planted. Margaret did nothing with them for about a year, and then had them planted beyond the vegetable garden. They quickly became overgrown, so many were moved. Many of the azaleas that were originally planted in rows remain that way today.¹¹

One of the rhododendrons located north of the house was named for J.C. after his death (the “John C. White” rhododendron). It was bred by George Ring and cultivated by the Goodriches.¹² A “Margaret K. White” rhododendron is waiting to be planted nearby.

In the late 1990s, Mrs. White was faced with a decision to sell the property for housing development. As she recalled, “I couldn’t bear to see the plants torn up or trees cut down and turned into more housing. For a long time I wished I could afford to give it to the County. Then someone suggested the County might be willing to pay me something for it. I had to decide between not denying my children, selling to developers, and what I was willing to take for it. No one will ever know what sacrifice the children were willing to make by not selling

⁸ Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed June 15, 2001, on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives.

⁹ Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed June 15, 2001, on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

¹⁰ Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed June 15, 2001 on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

¹¹ Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed June 15, 2001 on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

¹² Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed June 15, 2001, on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

to developers. It was the children who made the sacrifice, not me.”¹³ The County acquired the property in October 1999, and Mrs. White currently retains a life estate and oversees the day-to-day maintenance of the home and grounds. Upon the expiration of the life estate, the property and its upkeep will transfer to FCPA for operation as a horticultural park.¹⁴

¹³ Margaret K. White, oral interview, January 2001. Transcribed June 15, 2001, on file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

¹⁴ Fairfax County Park Authority, General Management Plan: John C. and Margaret K. White Horticultural Park, draft. On file at Fairfax County Park Authority archives, Fairfax, Virginia.

