

Knowledge blooms on tour of gardens





Photos by Steve Bisson/Savannah Morning News

Christy Crisp, left, director of programs for the Georgia Historical Society, pauses under the arched walkways next to St. John's Episcopal during a tour in downtown Savannah of gardens designed by landscape architect Clermont Lee.

Summer class studies projects of landscape architect Clermont Lee

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Starting in the 1950s, and working with plants, trees and bushes, landscape architect Clermont Lee brought an antebellum flavor back to Savannah streets, squares and gardens during her lengthy career, a green and genteel footprint that still can be seen today.

Lee re-created historical landscapes, particularly mid-19th-century landscapes, and her designs are evident throughout downtown, said Christy Crisp, director of programs for the Georgia Historical Society.

A Savannah native, Lee planned and supervised projects at the Owens-Thomas, Davenport and Green-Mel-drim houses, Madison, Troup and Greene squares, and at cemetery plots and in private gardens.

Lee, who died in 2006, did not have



Participants of a Georgia Historical Society's class review garden plans by landscape architect Clermont Lee before a walking tour of downtown Savannah gardens.

a signature style, making each garden different.

"She tends to use plants that you would expect — azaleas, cabbage palms, crepe myrtles, ivy, jasmine, etc. — but nothing seems to reappear in every garden," Crisp said.

To explain Lee's importance, and to illustrate how much of her impact

is still blooming and growing, Crisp included a class on her in the GHS' summer schedule. "The Gardens of Clermont Lee: A Downtown Walking Tour" set out from Forsyth Park on a recent morning, its 20-or-so participants sporting sunscreen, comfortable

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shoes and bottles of water.

"This is a very small project," Crisp said, standing at one of the tour's first stops, a house at Bull and Jones streets. The garden was set up for a doctor in the mid-1960s, but the property is now owned by Savannah College of Art and Design.

"You can still see (Lee's) fingerprints here," Crisp said.

A block or so later, the group stopped at a much more imposing site — Madison Square. Lee participated in the square's landscaping, Crisp said, but her major influence here was broader.

She was an "outspoken opponent" of a city-backed proposal in the 1950s, which would have allowed emergency vehicles, such as police cars and fire trucks, and buses to drive through the middle of the squares. She helped defeat that effort and also made a sweeping suggestion that still affects downtown drivers.

Lee pushed for curb cuts that set up wide turning areas in front of the squares, Crisp said. It was done to maintain the historic integrity of these unique green spaces.

Her role in this, and many of her other projects, has been underplayed or understated through the years. "She never sought, or wanted, any credit, but she did so much," said Jeanne Lee, her sister-in-law and one of the people on the tour.

Cultivating knowledge

From Madison Square, the tour went through the Northeast Quadrant of the Historic District, an area where Lee worked on private houses and public spaces. She paired with preservationist Mills



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Tour members look and photograph the garden at the Green-Meldrim House on Madison Square.

B. Lane Jr. to develop landscapes for renovated antebellum homes, and glimpses of those gardens through gates offer leafy evidence of her skills.

Crisp stopped and talked at several of those locations, and at Greene Square, another site with still-visible Lee touches. There, as throughout the tour, she had to try to talk over the noises produced by city buses, tour buses, garbage trucks, mowers, blowers, cars, trucks, electric tools, hand tools, town criers and even church bells.

Still, Mary Lou Brewton of South Carolina made an effort to hear every word.

A tour guide, Brewton said this and other "authentic" classes offered by the GHS have greatly enhanced her knowledge of Savannah, and thus serve as a boon to her business.

"This way," she said, "I know what I'm talking about when I lead a group."

Deeply rooted opinions

About 90 sweaty minutes after the tour started, the group reached the last stop, the garden of the Owens-Thomas House. It is, Crisp said, probably the best-preserved

ON THE WEB



Read a timeline of Clermont Lee's career at savannahnow.com/accent.

of Lee's public projects.

Very little has changed since Lee finished the garden in 1954, said Cyndi Sommers, the administrative assistant for the Owens-Thomas House. The sole major alteration came in the mid-1980s when the house moved a Roman urn, which had been the garden's centerpiece, and installed a fountain, Sommers said.

The change, however, angered Lee who then informed the Owens-Thomas House that it could no longer be described as a "Clermont Lee garden."

That anecdote brought a smile to the face of Alice Lee, Fraser, Lee's niece, who also was on the tour.

Her aunt, Fraser said, never married and lived to be 92. Her family donated hundreds of architectural drawings, done in pencil by Lee, to the GHS after her death.

Those plans, a number of which were on display at the GHS headquarters before the tour stepped off, served as the foundation for the class.