

Bishop's Garden by Suzanne Miller

The Bishop's Garden was designed by Frederic Law Olmsted, Jr. as the garden of the Bishop of Washington's residence. Both house and garden are in keeping with the style of the English 14th century Gothic cathedral and its Close. The Garden is enclosed by a high stone wall. It is laid out south of the Bishop's house, terraced into the steep hillside. Arched entrances with heavy wooden doors pierce the wall. The garden planting beds are edged with coping stone quarried from George Washington's Aquia Creek quarry. The stone paths and stone artifacts recall medieval monastery gardens. Medieval sculptured panels decorate the garden wall. Medieval arches form the entrances. Medieval columns and an ancient wayside cross rise amongst the flowering plants.

The garden is planted with fruit trees, roses, perennial flowering plants and herbs. Boxwood edges many of the planting beds. Evergreen holly, yew, cedar, rosemary, lavender and sage lend their shades of green in winter. A little garden, Hortulus, planted with herbs from Charlemagne's time (800 AD) surrounds an ancient Carolingian stone font. Two cedars from Lebanon, a cutting from the Glastonbury thorn, a Judas tree planted in the garden evoke the Holy Land and Christian legends.

Florence Brown Bratenahl, wife of the first Dean of the Cathedral, took on the task of carrying out Olmsted's plan. In 1916 she formed All Hallow's Guild, the garden guild of the Cathedral, to raise the funds. She scoured the countryside of Maryland and Virginia to find mature plant material that would give the garden the feeling of being an ancient place. She studied medieval gardens and medieval monastery plant lists. She worked closely with the Olmsted firm to assure that the plants she found met the Olmsted specifications

George Gray Barnard was an American sculptor. While a student and artist in France, he had collected medieval sculpture and fragments of medieval buildings from ruined monasteries in the countryside. He brought his collection back to New York where he incorporated it into a house, studio and gardens he built on the Hudson. His collection was the most extensive of medieval sculpture in America at the time and it later formed the basis of the "The Cloisters" collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Mrs.

Bratenahl chose medieval capitals and sculptures from Barnard's collection for the Bishop's garden where they add to the feeling of an ancient garden. From 1927 to 1936 Mrs. Bratenahl was the landscape designer of the Washington Cathedral.

March, 2009