



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ellen Axson Wilson's rose garden (opposite), the first open air rose garden at the White House (technically there had been a rose garden under glass on the spot when the great conservatories still stood), reflected the sophisticated gardening taste of a woman familiar with the modern Beaux-Arts idea that gardens served architecture. The long, privet-bordered walkway in the foreground she called the "President's Walk," which she created to give the president a handsome approach from the White House to the West Wing. By the Eisenhower administration (seen above in 1959), the Wilson rose garden had been modified, especially during World War II. By 1961, President John F. Kennedy would find it too small for the presidential functions and events he envisioned hosting there.



BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION / OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION

President Kennedy's Garden Rachel Lambert Mellon's Redesign of the White House Rose Garden

WILLIAM SEALE

When Rachel Lambert Mellon transformed the White House gardens for President John F. Kennedy, she joined the small number who, through nearly two centuries, had made dramatic alterations to the grounds of the White House.

The White House grounds have been continually changed but, for the most part, changed only in small ways. Yet gardening itself has been ongoing through time, and while there have always been White House gardeners, and occasionally gardening presidents—John Quincy Adams, for example—big change is rare. Into this major category falls Mrs. Mellon's White House career, which began in 1962. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon entertained John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy at their home on Cape Cod in

August 1961, some nine months after his election to the presidency. Mr. Mellon, an ardent Republican, was pleased nevertheless with the new head of state. Mrs. Mellon may have been more impressed, for she had joined the Democratic Party. President Kennedy was already aware of her gardening interests and during the luncheon mentioned to her that he wanted some changes to the gardens at the White House. Would she undertake this work? With some hesitation, yet attracted by the challenge of a project in her favorite field of interest, she agreed. The garden's transformation was to begin as soon as possible. Delays were not allowed at the White House, she was to learn, and this exactly fit her own way of doing things.

Mrs. Mellon later wondered why she had said yes. She called herself an "amateur gardener" and was uncertain about taking on so ambitious a project. The prospect troubled her. She was unable to settle upon a design until one October evening, walking down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, she paused before the Henry Clay Frick Museum. She was struck by the *Magnolia soulangeana* (saucer magnolia) trees, bereft of their leaves, yet with their silvery, reflective trunks and limbs in a new winter life as garden architecture. Mrs. Mellon had found her inspiration: "I felt now I could design the president's garden."

*The president stands with his brother
U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy on
the columned porch outside the Oval Office
in February 1961. They are looking toward the
sprawl of lawn, privet, and boxwood, which
Mrs. Mellon would soon transform to serve
the president as the ideal space for official
White House events and ceremonies.*



BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION



OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION

Rachel Lambert Mellon

Rachel Lambert was nicknamed "Bunny" by her nurse on the day she was born, August 9, 1910, and she bore it all the 103 years she lived. Her love for flowers and plants came early as well, for as a little girl she roamed the meadows at her parents' homes in New Jersey, New York, and rural Virginia, making bouquets of wildflowers. As she grew up and her floral interests broadened, she held sentimentally to the idea of childhood. Her book collecting began with children's books. Gardening books followed soon, eventually taking the lead, although the books and toys of childhood were always close to her heart.

The Lambert family was prominent in various successful businesses, the best known being, on her father's side, the production of Listerine, which was invented in 1879 by Bunny Mellon's grandfather, Jordan Wheat Lambert, and his colleague, Dr. Joseph Lawrence. Presented with about every advantage a young woman could have, Bunny Mellon learned early to select carefully those things she wished to do and carried them out tenaciously. This gift of focus was to characterize her all her life. Under the tutelage of her beloved teacher Charlotte Haxall Noland, at Foxcroft School, she became a notable horsewoman, expert in use of the sidesaddle. She never abandoned the sidesaddle, which Miss Charlotte had taught her was the only appropriate way for a woman to ride, and she gave up riding only with regret late in life. Gardens were a pleasure she never abandoned. Her

Among the objects in the collection of Oak Spring Library that tell the story of Rachel Lambert Mellon's childhood are early Listerine bottles marked with the Lambert name (above left) and a small guide to wildflowers east of the Rockies, which was a gift from her grandfather in 1921.

Mrs. Mellon was a skilled horsewoman who always rode sidesaddle in the fields and roads of Oak Spring. A portrait made by Francis L. Smith in 1935 (opposite), shows her sidesaddle on Buberry, a favorite mount.

interest and knowledge increased. She gardened wherever she lived, and there were many places through the years, although home was always her and Paul Mellon's farm Oak Spring, near Upperville, Virginia. Her devotion to collecting books about gardening expanded. She kept a sharp eye for rare books. It was a limited field, to be sure, but Mrs. Mellon would give it definition. The house at Oak Spring was filled with books, on shelves, in closets, and under beds; still she remained the true collector, buying and bringing home more.

The White House Gardens and the President's Purposes

Mrs. Mellon's pledge to President Kennedy in August 1961 came due early in 1962. In the mean-



time she had sent him a copy of the American Philosophical Society's 1944 publication of Thomas Jefferson's gardening notes.¹ This book, she later said, fired him to proceed. The subject became far more interesting to Kennedy than he had believed it might be. Throughout the project he encouraged and praised, and sometimes impatiently watched over her work.

In the White House gardens Mrs. Mellon found good things and bad. President Ulysses S. Grant's fountains still sprayed elegantly. Some of Rutherford B. Hayes's elms and buckeye trees survived, and plantings on the berms of Franklin D. Roosevelt's new configuration of the South Lawn were mature. Andrew Jackson's *Magnolia grandiflora* from Tennessee still brought forth fragrant white blossoms in June. But all the elements of the grounds needed trimming, editing, and in some areas, rethinking. For example, First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson's rose garden, between the house and the West Wing, had lost its elegant Beaux-Arts crispness. Boxwood everywhere had been invaded by privet and was harshly shaped by pruning shears. The only flowers were "pitiful little tom thumb roses," Mrs. Mellon recalled.

President Kennedy knew that Mrs. Mellon would build the garden he wanted. He had set his hopes for a new rose garden to replace Mrs. Wilson's garden, designed a half a century before. The space for this garden extended from the north and west L-shaped colonnade of the West Wing, outside the Oval Office, to the lofty stone wall at the west end of the White House. The south side was open to scattered trees, lawn, and sky. Kennedy's reason for improving this garden was to make it beautiful but also functional as a new space for official use. He envisioned handsome plantings around a stretch of green lawn that would receive three or four hundred people—maybe many more—for a ceremony.

The president's motive in wanting this new garden was to shorten the ceremonial traditions at the White House while preserving their glory. He saw purpose in tradition and ceremony but believed traditional exercises could be sharpened, their color heightened, and still be less of a distraction to the busy business day. Pursuant to this idea, he had asked Letitia Baldrige of the East Wing social office to simplify the State Arrival Ceremonies that took place at the South Portico. This long, splendid, time-consuming daytime event began mid-morning with a parade

from National Airport to the White House. Federal employees were given leave from work to stand along the streets and wave small souvenir flags. At the White House awaited a crowd admitted from the street. A military review was performed. The principals—the president and guests—delivered speeches, and the Marine Band played music.

Baldrige trimmed the ceremony of well over an hour down to twenty-two minutes, carefully orchestrating the most effective of the traditional elements to frame the simple greeting between the president and the foreign guest of state. She had kept the spirit of the event and even sweetened its soul-stirring dramatic quality. This was the sort of innovation Kennedy liked. Likewise the new Rose Garden under Mrs. Mellon was to become a green theater, where announcements and presentations would take place in a setting rich and beautiful but occupying only a brief, seemingly unrushed interlude from work.

Mrs. Mellon was not burdened with committees. She explained to the president that to get the job done on a short schedule of four months, she needed no interruptions. Her approach was to find an individual she could communicate with, one who knew horticulture and gardening, could manage a work crew on short deadlines, and was aware of the particular and sometimes peculiar ways of the White House. It seemed at first a daunting task, but it did not turn out to be. Close at hand was Irwin M. Williams, a National Park Service gardener stationed at a Park Service horticultural facility in Maryland. Mrs. Mellon called theirs a "meeting of minds." She would design and he would council with her on plants and what might and might not be possible. The two would interact directly in creating the new Rose Garden. Williams was transferred to the White House at once to become the head gardener (superintendent of the White House grounds), a position he held with distinction until his retirement nearly fifty years later.

At Oak Spring, her Washington house in Georgetown, and her house on Antigua, Mrs. Mellon labored over her drawing board. If the resulting drawings were more like sketches, they still were a lot more precise than Jefferson's, and her drawings better conveyed her ideas. The long, narrow sheets were put immediately to work. She made frequent visits to the site, flying from the airstrip at Oak Spring to Washington, where a car conveyed her to the White



President Kennedy envisioned a Rose Garden that would serve as a green theater, but prior to Mrs. Mellon's redesign long rows of privet divided the space and limited the number of guests that could be accommodated at events such as the one seen in the photograph above of President Harry S. Truman speaking to a group of foreign journalists in May 1951. Kennedy also wanted to conduct State Arrival Ceremonies from the White House lawn, eliminating time-consuming parades and presidential trips to the airport. Following the existing custom, President Truman (top) traveled to National Airport to welcome the shah of Iran in 1949. In March 1951 tanks led a welcoming parade for French President Vincent Auriol through the streets of Washington toward the White House (center). A partially covered platform was set up in the garden for the presentation of a gift from Princess Elizabeth to President Truman in 1951. After the new Rose Garden was completed, the grounds were tailored to serve such ceremonies and presentations.



ALL IMAGES THIS PAGE: HARRY S. TRUMAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM



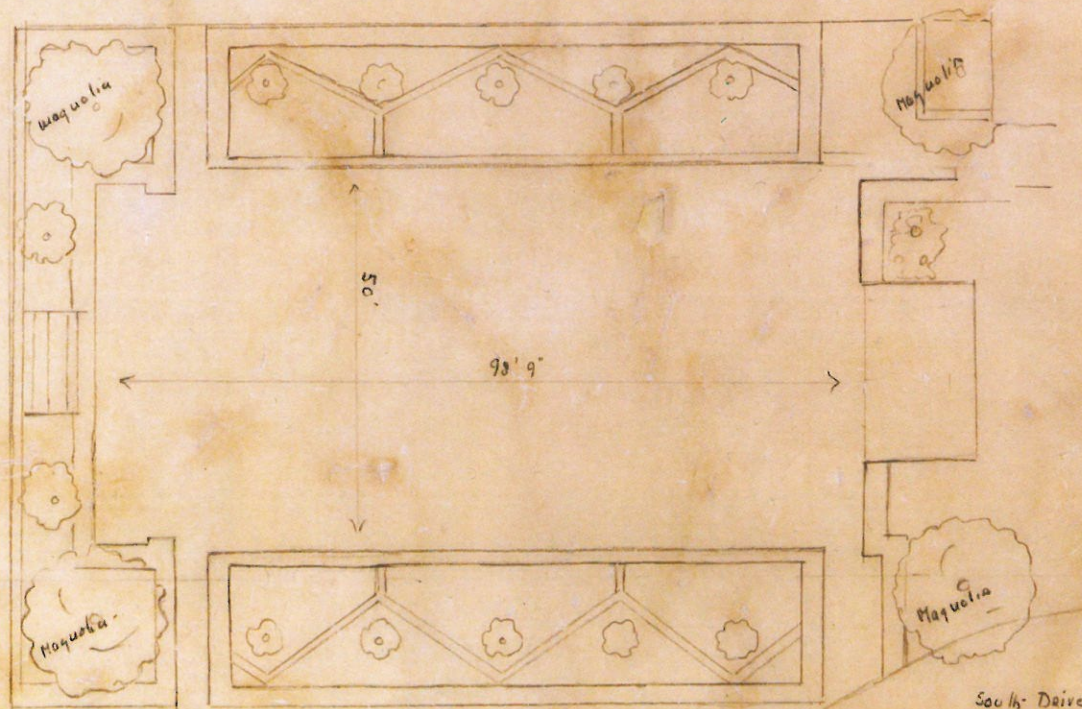
Mrs. Mellon's "Proposed Plan for President Kennedy" dated January 24, 1962, includes a sketch of the Rose Garden inspired in part by the mature saucer magnolias planted at the Frick Museum of Art in New York City (above). Her drawing of a similar specimen is labeled "available near Tidal Basin." As she had hoped, the magnolias she spotted near the Tidal Basin were transplanted to the Rose Garden (overleaf).

House. Those gardeners she admired in the field were asked for their opinions but not invited in; nothing could delay the work. The most helpful of the outside critics was her friend Perry Wheeler, for many years the leading garden designer in Georgetown. But it was with Irwin Williams that she interacted the most. They refined the designs. President Kennedy studied them and was delighted. One change he requested was removal and redesign of the steps leading from the West Wing colonnade. Why not build new ones that were a platform of sorts? He wanted such a structure for speaking that allowed him to see above the crowd but not make him appear to be standing higher than those being honored at ceremonies.

This problem of the steps led to many projects on paper. The size of the steps were varied in many trials. Finally the perfect platform was created that looked very simple—broad stone steps from the



porch—but accomplished what the president wanted in his little stage. Nor was the platform the only problem to work out. Mrs. Mellon asked Williams to locate a small number of mature *Magnolia soulangeana* trees to move to the garden. She was especially emphatic about these. Standing before the Frick she had envisioned one of these trees, of substantial size, on each corner of the Rose Garden. In fact she had found the perfect ones while driving around the Tidal Basin. Alas, she was told, those were off-limits, belonging to the National Park Service. Williams did not hesitate. After all, in the bitter January of 1951 he had dug a V-shape trench beneath the historic century old Jackson Magnolia at the White House, slid the tree some 25 feet out from the building, and saw it bloom that June in its usual profusion. Besides that move, which he had accomplished for President Harry Truman, the desired



Proposed Plan
for
President Kennedy 1962
Jan 24

Rachel Lambert Mellon

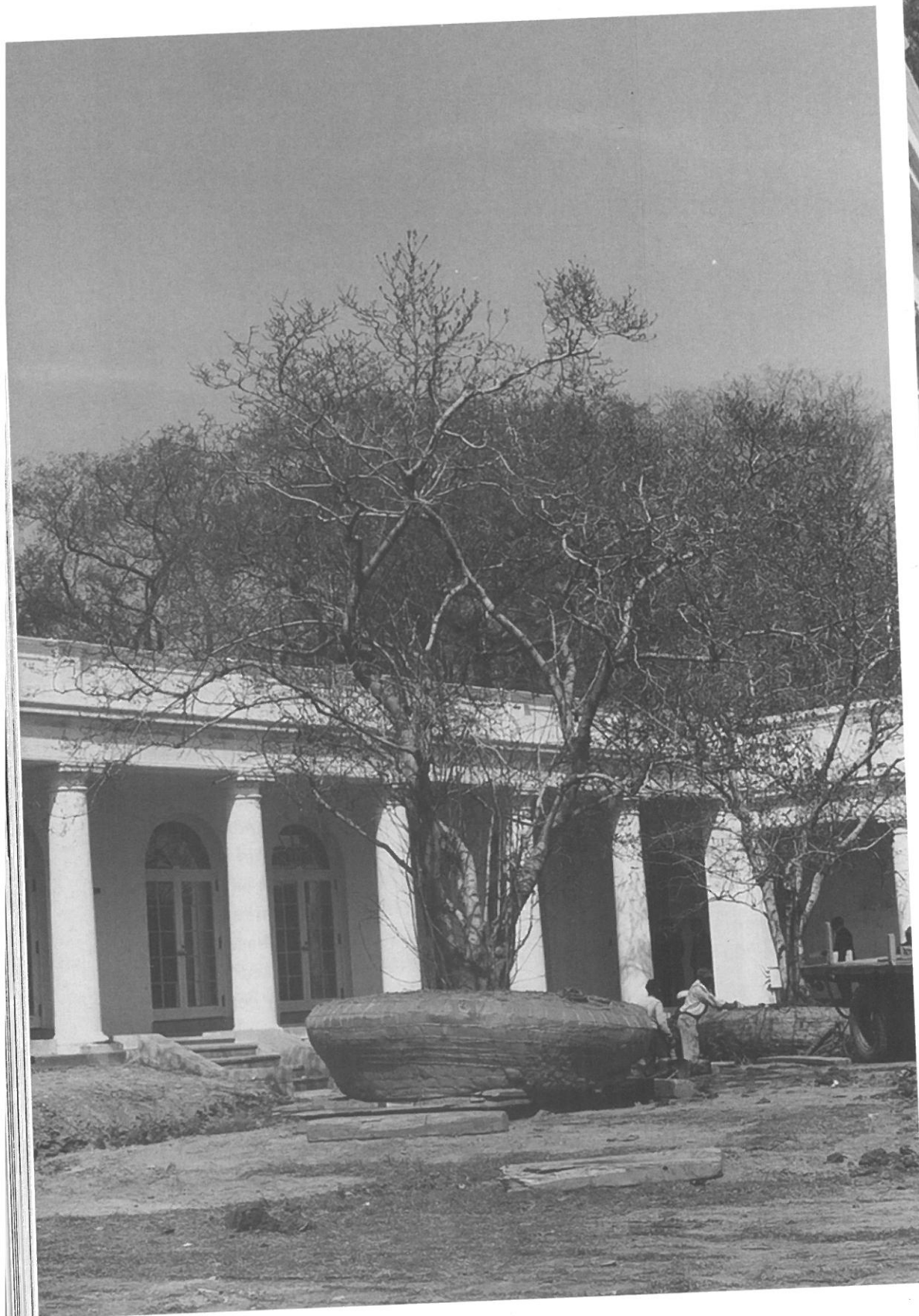
Magnolia soulangeana was only a minor mountain for Irwin Williams. The Tidal Basin magnolias appeared in the Rose Garden, by conspiracy removed and balled by night, and hauled through the silent town to the White House.

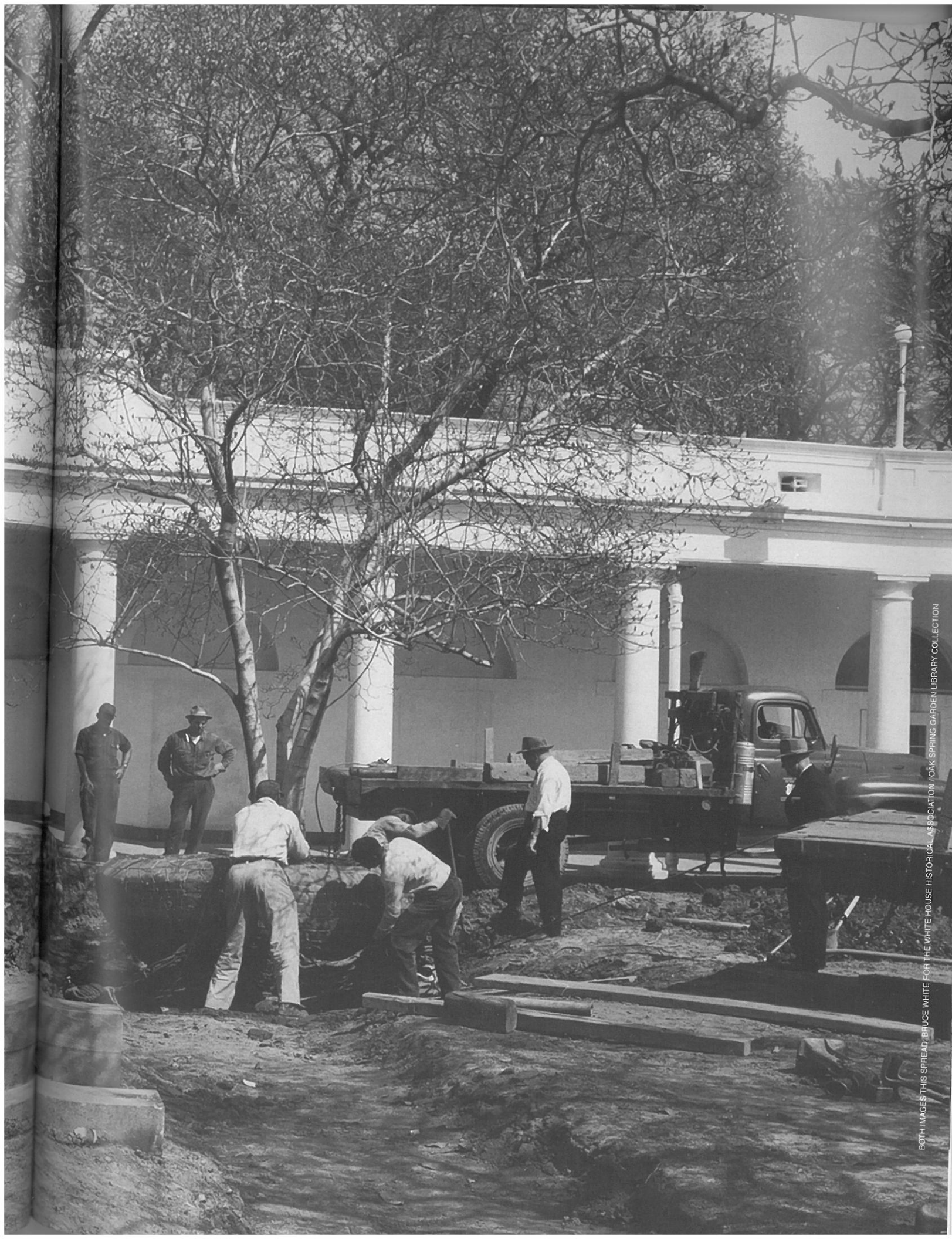
Of the dramas that seem always to appear in White House projects, the Rose Garden rebuilding only experienced one. The work was well under way on March 31, 1962, when a shovel severed the line of the communications network that connected the president's desk to the Strategic Air Command. Alarms howled. The Secret Service scrambled. The problem was soon solved, and would have been corrected sooner had anyone known in advance where the communications lines were located. Mrs. Mellon enjoyed telling the story and quipped at the end, "A war was avoided."

The construction of the garden was completed

in spring 1962, but the work went on in earnest through the autumn. Much of it was handwork, removing the existing soil 4 feet down and introducing new, fertilized soil in its place. Often as many as thirty National Park Service groundworkers labored in the basics of building a healthy new base for the garden. For a long time the garden looked like a construction site. By late spring it lay ready beneath its deep cloak of rich earth, some trees already in place, notably, besides the magnolias, crab apple trees that would spring in lines from the long sides of the lawn. Mrs. Mellon took great interest in what she called the "skeleton" of the garden to come. With her plans rolled under her arms she appeared frequently to consider and reconsider different plants in different places. President Kennedy urged her to use plants, particularly flowers, that were noted in Jefferson's garden journals, the only gardening history he knew.

The large Magnolia soulangeana trees moved from the Tidal Basin were positioned in the Rose Garden in April 1962.





BOTH IMAGES THIS SPREAD: BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION / OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION





CORBIS

BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

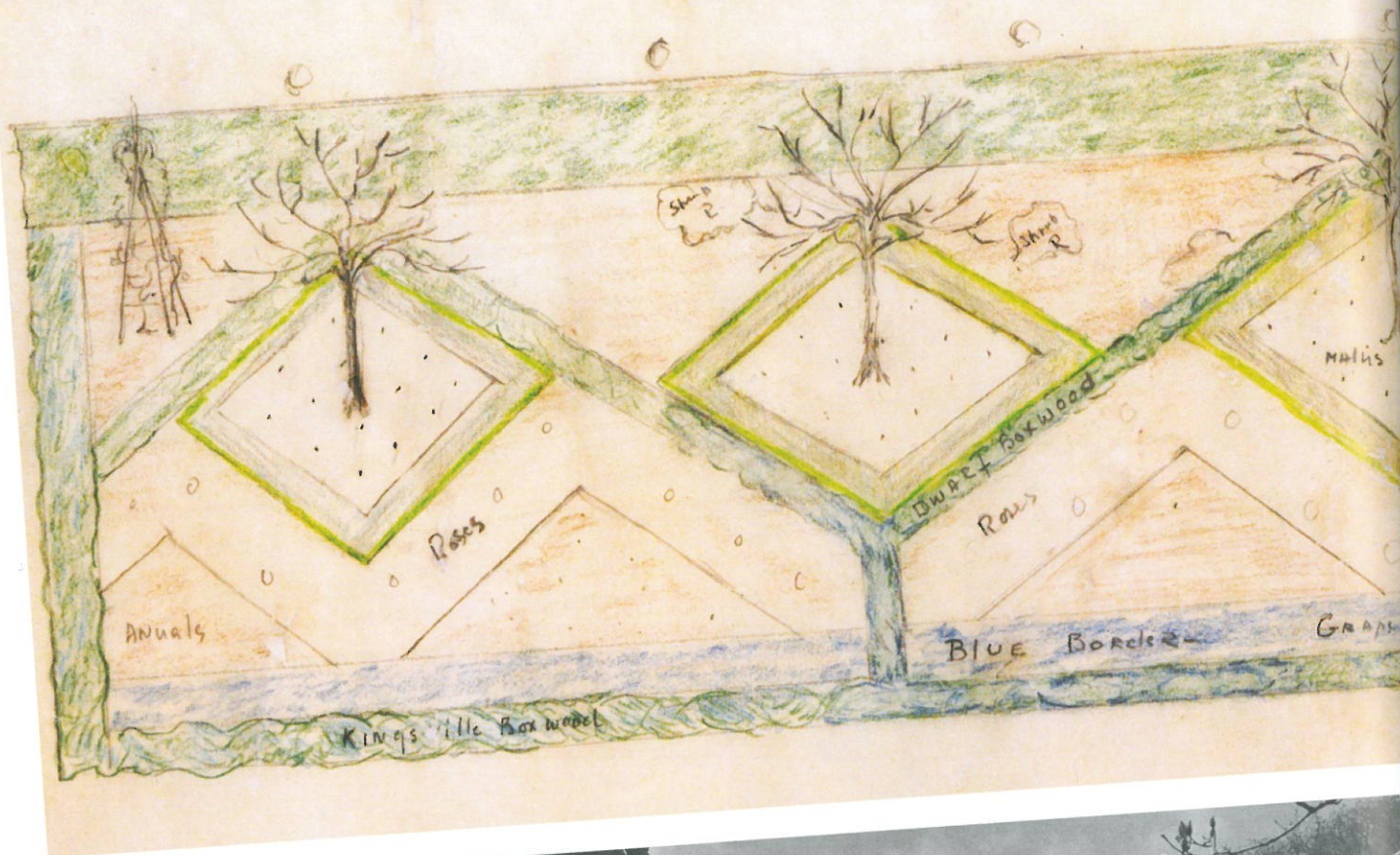


The saucer magnolias transplanted from the Tidal Basin continue to thrive in the Rose Garden today (above during pruning and below outside the Oval Office). The mature specimens provide a colorful spring backdrop for official ceremonies and events such as the joint news conference held by President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron in March 2012 (left).

BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

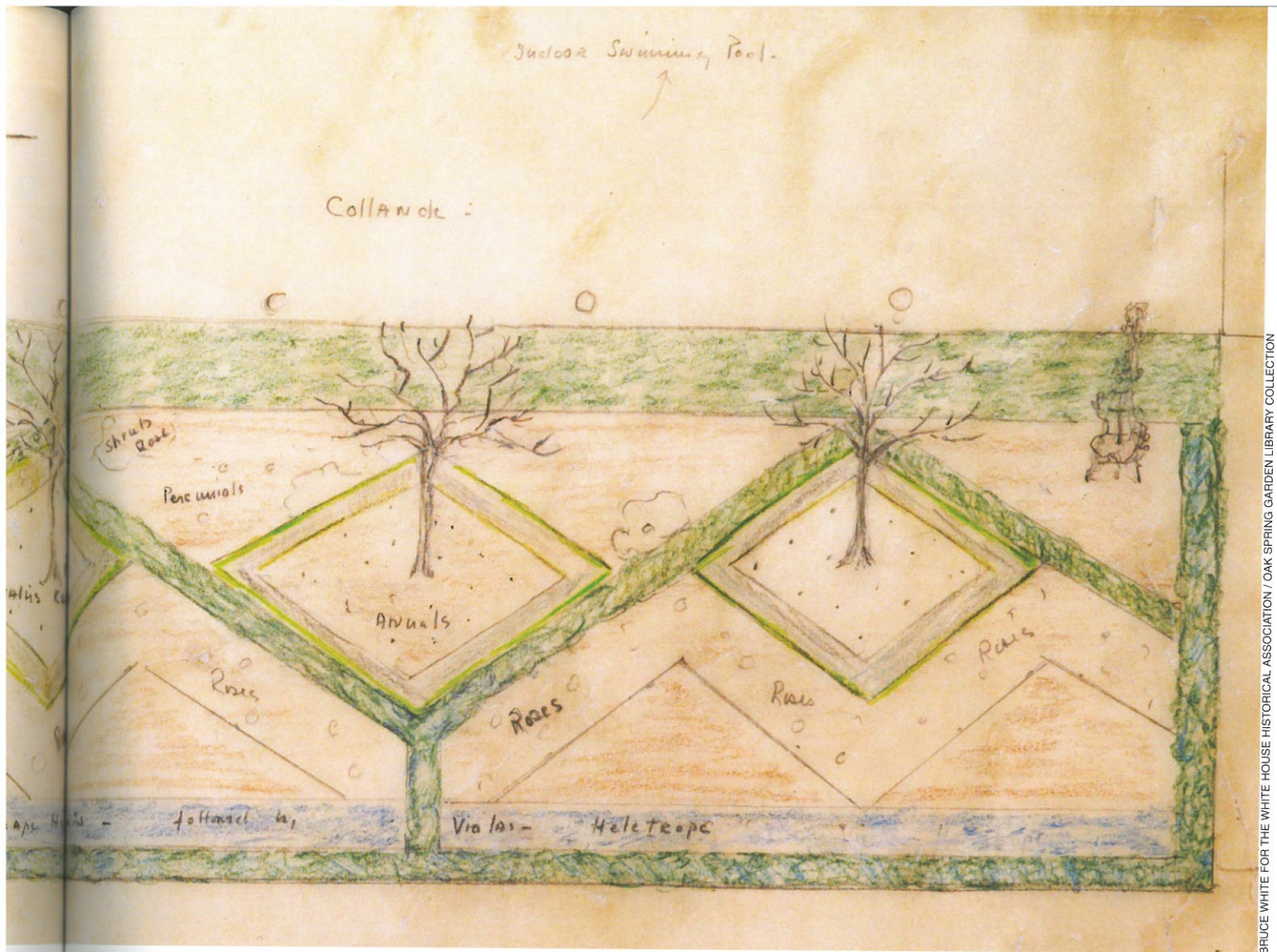


The Rose Garden —



Mrs. Mellon's January 1962 plan also included this sketch (above) of a long boxwood bordered flower bed. Central to the bed are five Katherine Crabapple specimens that would be surrounded by roses and perennials. The crabapple trees were planted in April 1962 (right) and remain in place today as Mrs. Mellon envisioned them along the colonnade where President Barack Obama is seen (opposite) on a stroll through the garden in May 2009.





BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION / OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION



A watercolor made by Mrs. Mellon in 1962 shows her overall concept for the Rose Garden and the design of the beds that would soon be realized.

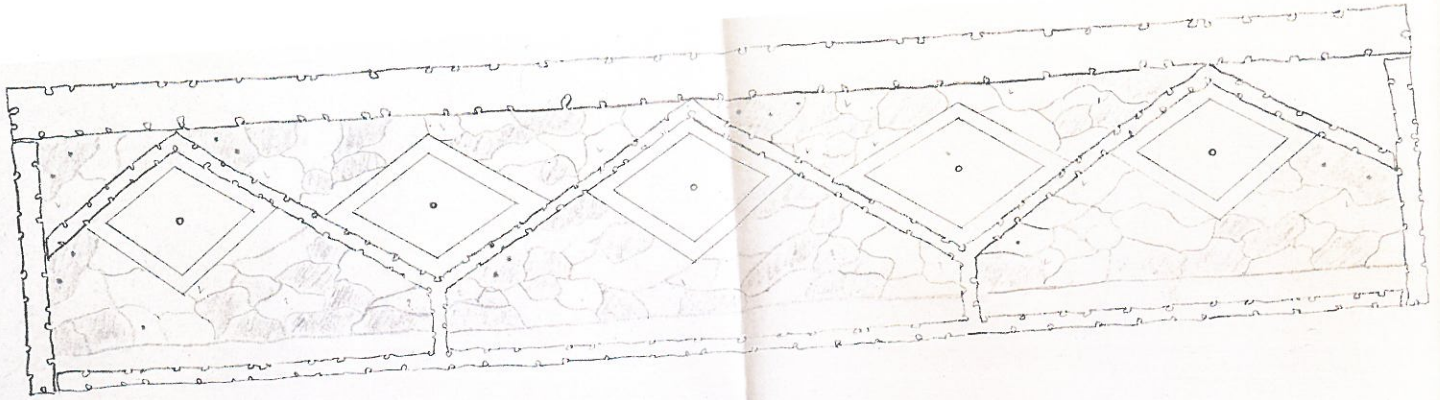




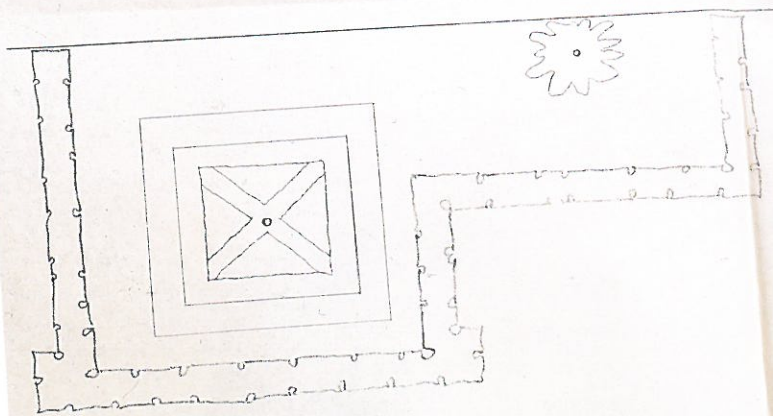
for The President's Garden

The White House

- 1962 -



BEDS EACH SIDE OF LAWN

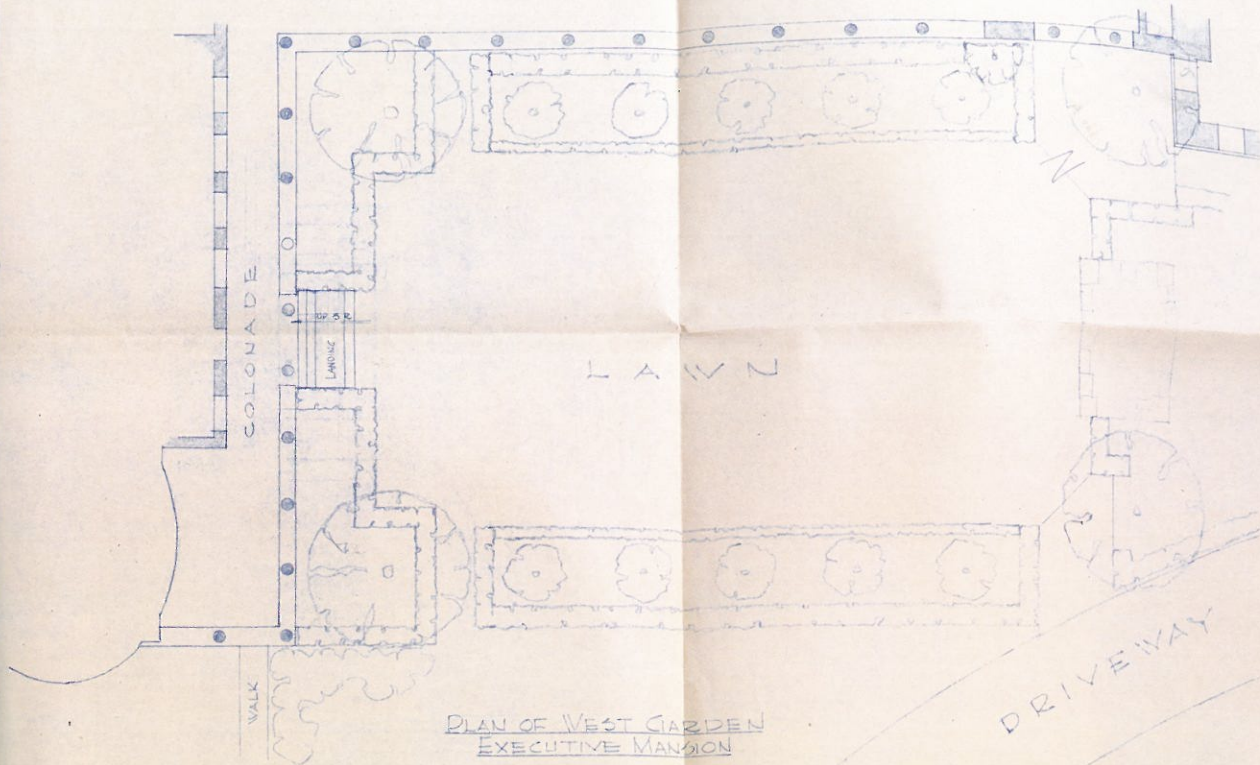


MAGNOLIA BEDS EACH SIDE OF STEPS

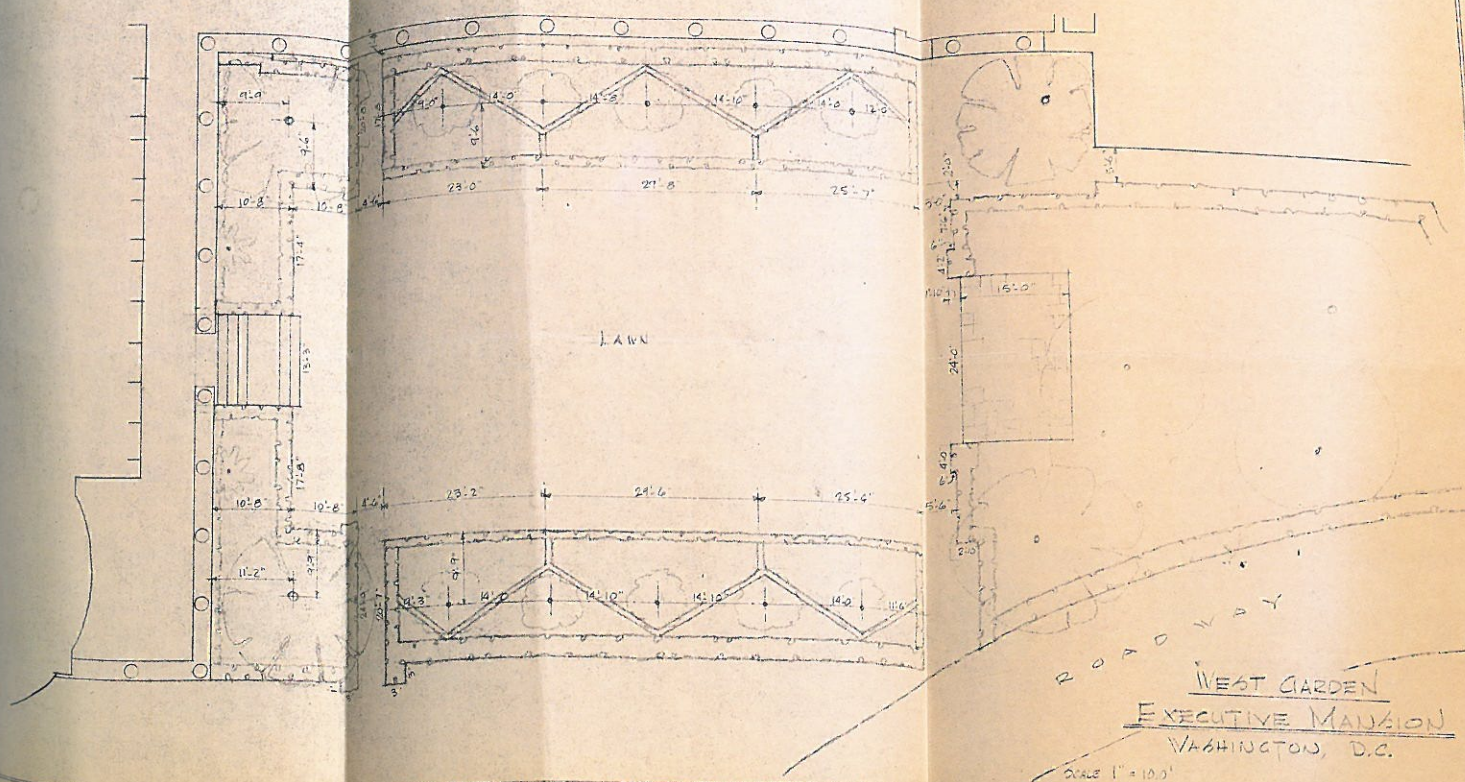
Chapman & Brown, Inc. 1963
 BASIC PLAN OF BEDS
 WEST GARDEN
 EXECUTIVE MANSION
 WASHINGTON, D.C.
 SCALE - 1/4" = 1'-0"
 4 MAR. 1963

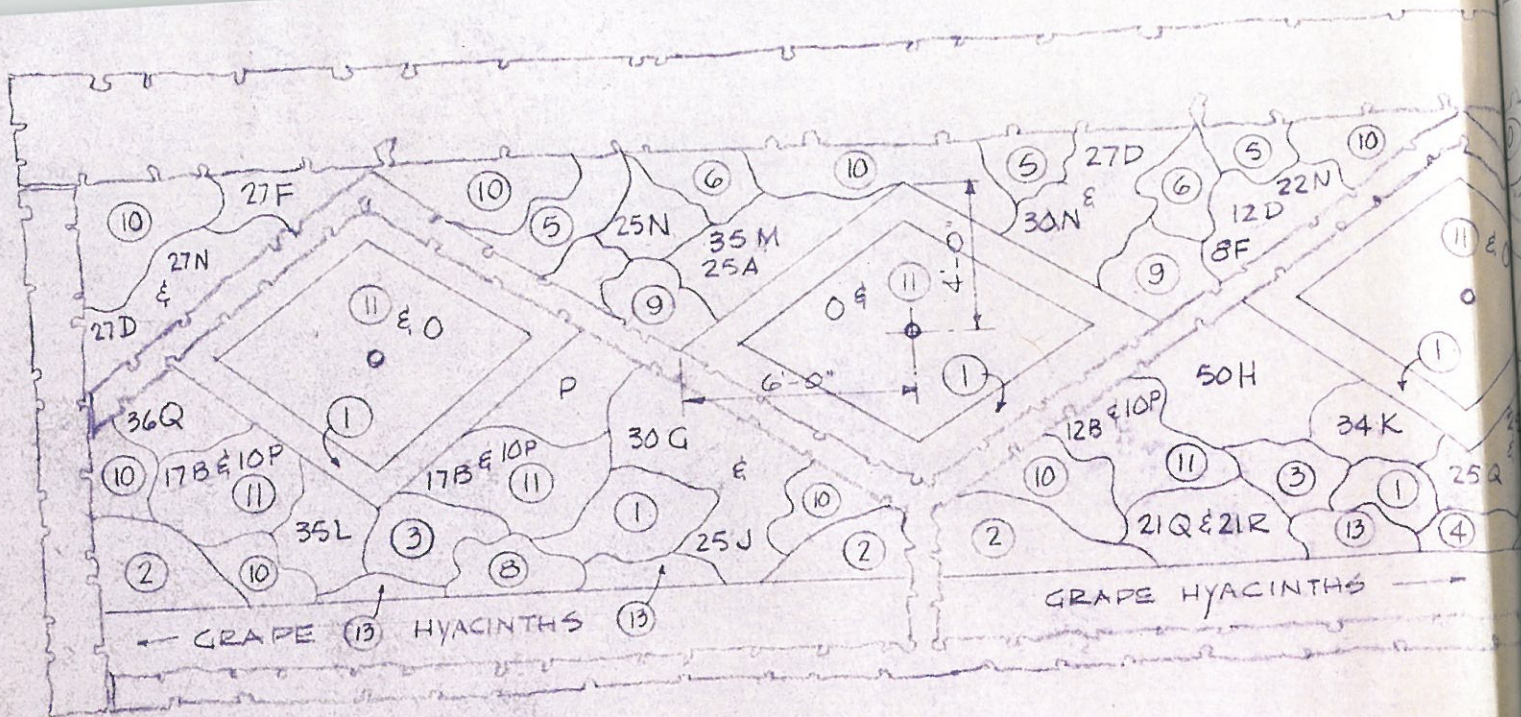
Mrs. Mellon's sketches were carried a step farther with more detailed architectural drawings now preserved in the collection of Oak Spring Garden Library. She keyed her specifications for particular plants to diagrams of the boxwood-lined garden beds.



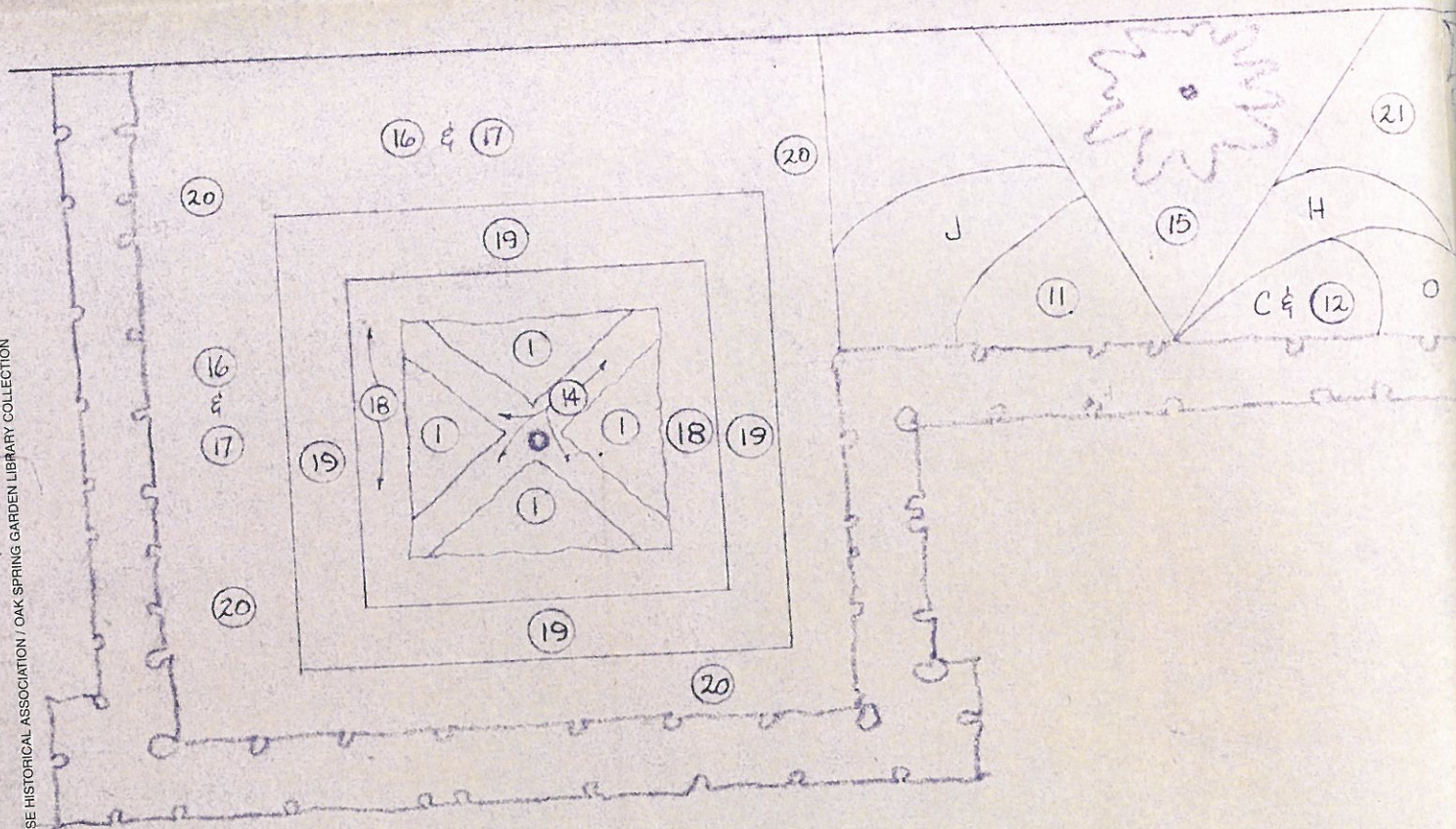


STUDY PLAN

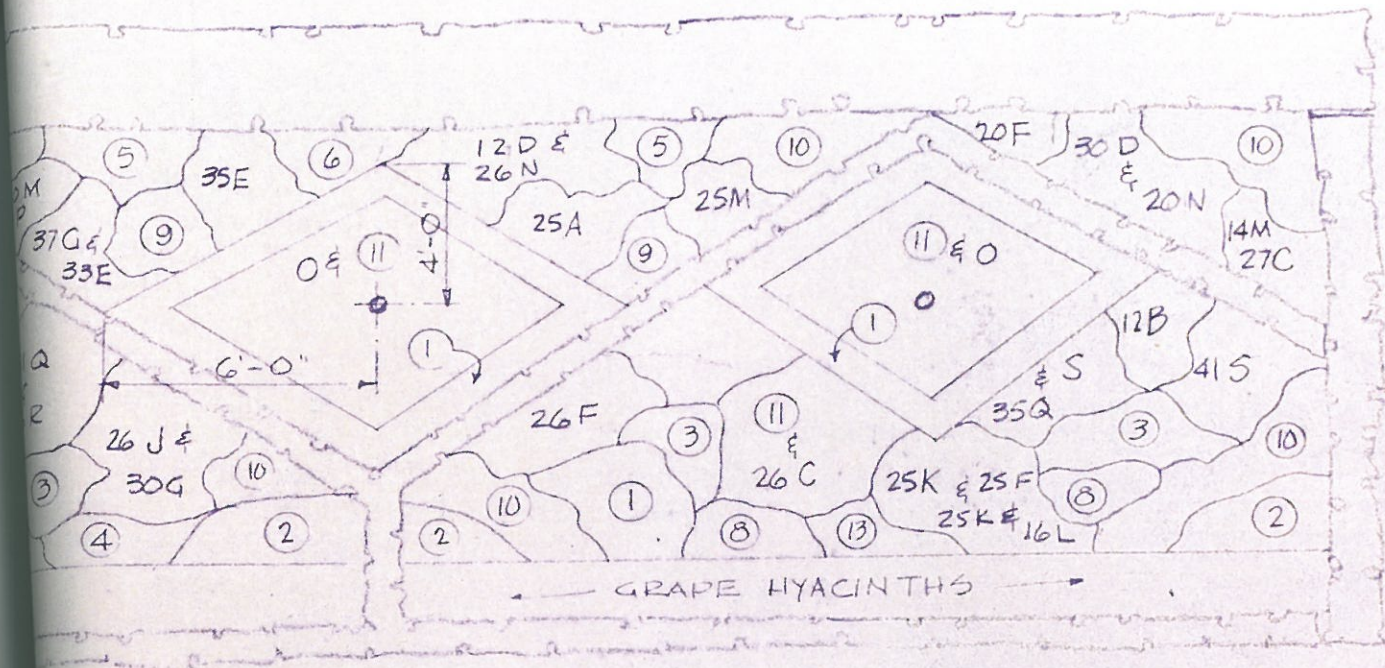




BEDS EACH SIDE OF LAWN



MAGNOLIA BEDS EACH SIDE OF STEPS



PLANTING LIST

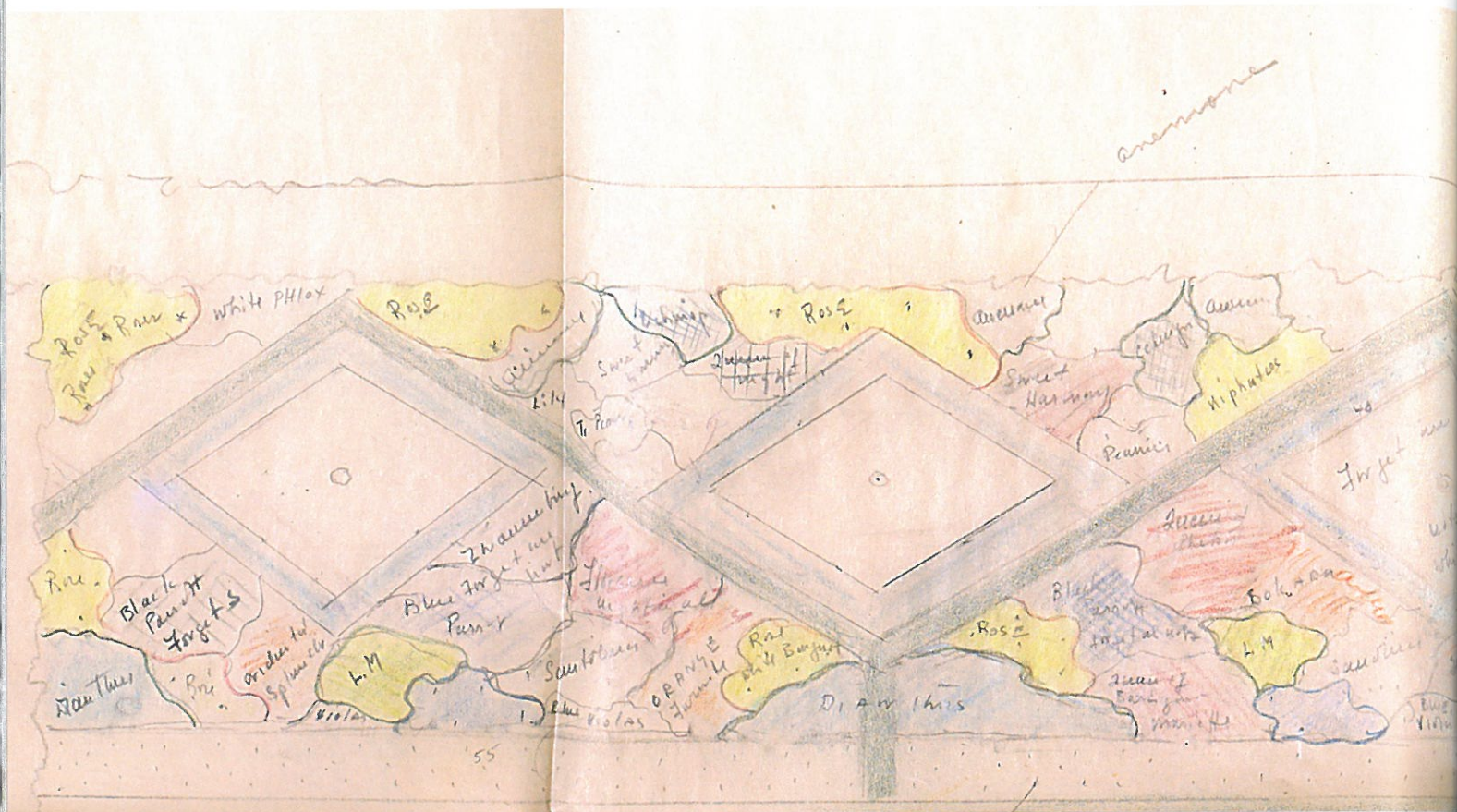
KEY	NAME & COLOR OF TULIP	HGT.
	PURPLE	
A	QUEEN OF THE NIGHT	30"
B	BLACK PARROT	28"
C	BLUE PARROT	22"
	YELLOW	
D	NEPHETOS	30"
	REDS	
E	ECLIPSE	30"
F	ECLIPSE SPECIAL	30"
G	FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE	27"
	ORANGE	
H	QUEEN OF SHEBA	27"
J	ORANGE FAVORITE	22"
K	BOKHARA	22"
L	ORIENTAL SPLENDOR	20"
	WHITE	
M	GLACIER	31"
N	SWEET HARMONY	28"
O	WHITE TRIUMPHATOR	27"
P	ZVANNENBURG - BLACK ANTH.	32"
	PINK	
Q	QUEEN OF BARTIGONS	26"
R	LILY - FLOWERING MARIETTA	25"
S	PARROT FANTASY	26"

KEY	
1	SANTOLINA
2	DIANTHUS
3	LADIES' MANTLE
4	NEPETA
5	ANEMONES
6	ECHINOPS
7	
8	COLUMBINE
9	SAUNDERS HYBRID DEONY
10	ROSES
11	MIXED FORGET-ME-NOTS
12	VIOLA (MIXED BLUE)
13	VIOLA (WHITE)
14	PRIMROSES
15	MARTIGON LILIES
16	SPRING CROCUSES (planted in sedum)
17	SCILLAS
18	HOSTA (EXISTING)
19	EPIMEDIUM (EXISTING)
20	SEDUM SIEBOLDI (EXISTING)
21	ACHILLEA (EXISTING)

PLANTING PLAN
WEST GARDEN
EXECUTIVE MANSION
WASHINGTON, D.C.

SCALE - 1/4" = 1'-0"

13 Nov 1962 (REV. 4 MAR '63)



The sketch above, made on translucent paper with colored pencil, is labeled "Bulb layout 1962." It is one of several drawings Mrs. Mellon made that could be placed on top of the study plan to show the color scheme designed for each bed.

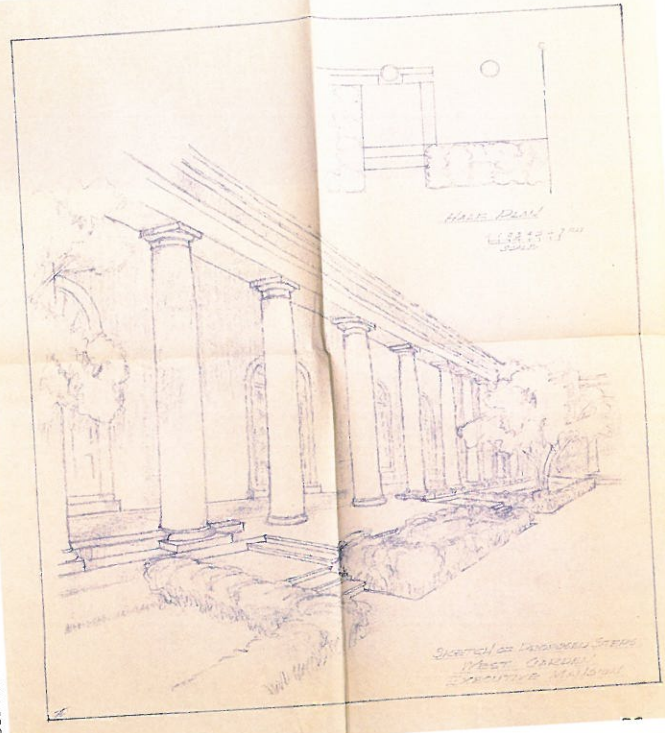
The bulbs in bloom in the White House Rose Garden on April 27, 1963 (left), show how her vision was realized one year after the garden was completed. Today, more than fifty years later, spring bulbs are still planted in the beds much as Mrs. Mellon envisioned. President Barack Obama is seen here in 2011 (right) on a walk through the Rose Garden with National Security Advisor Tom Donilon. As these images show, the Rose Garden assumes a great presence at the White House—seen in passing, through windows and in many more unexpected ways, like colorful jewelry amid the green surrounds and white walls.



The Problem of the Steps

President Dwight D. Eisenhower stands with the Foreign Policy Commission on the narrow steps leading from the Rose Garden to the porch outside the Oval Office, 1953 (below). President Kennedy wished to replace the narrow steep steps with a broad platform—a structure that would allow him to see above the crowd but not make him appear to be standing higher than those being honored at ceremonies. Two proposed plans are seen right and opposite.

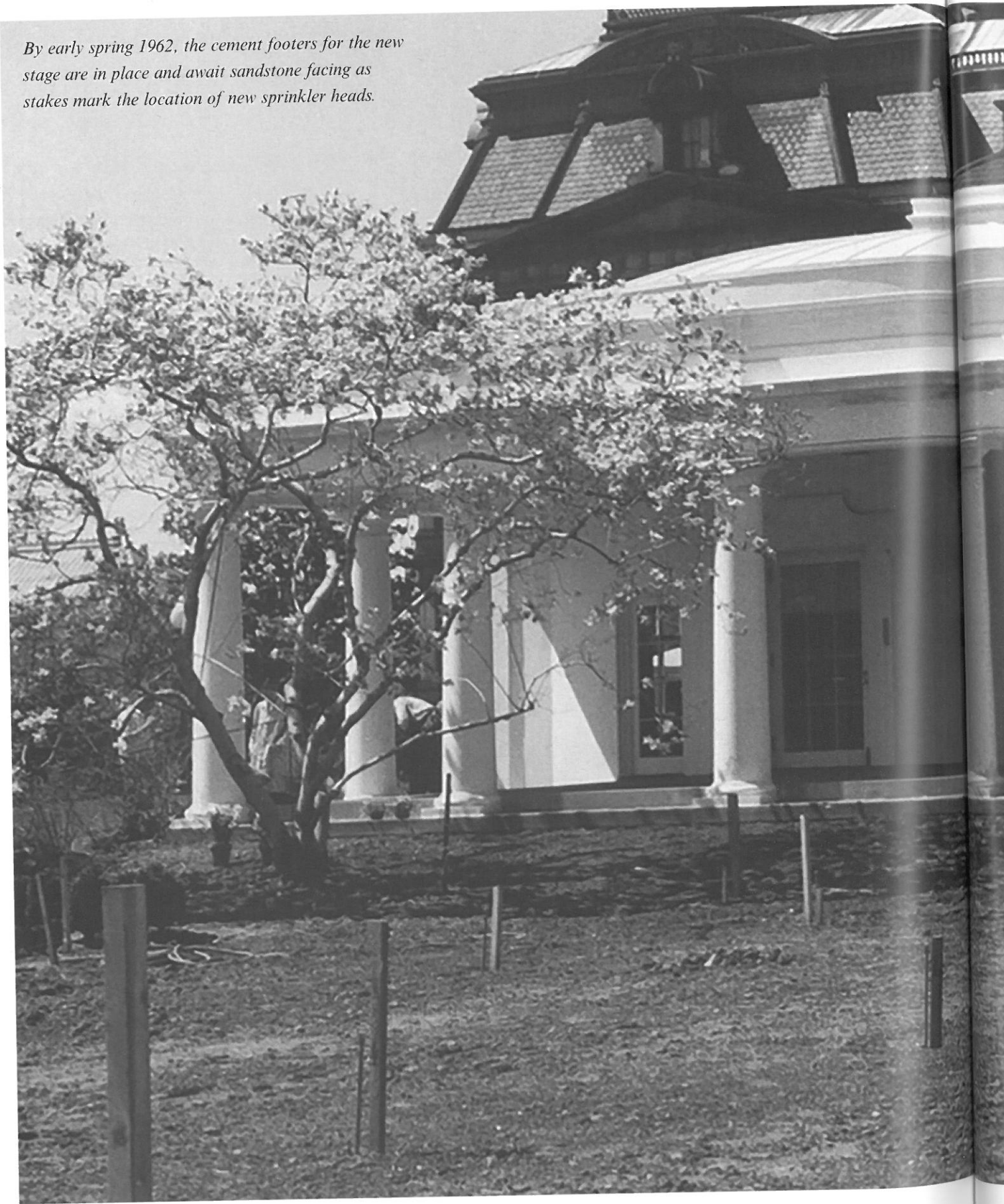
BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION / OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION

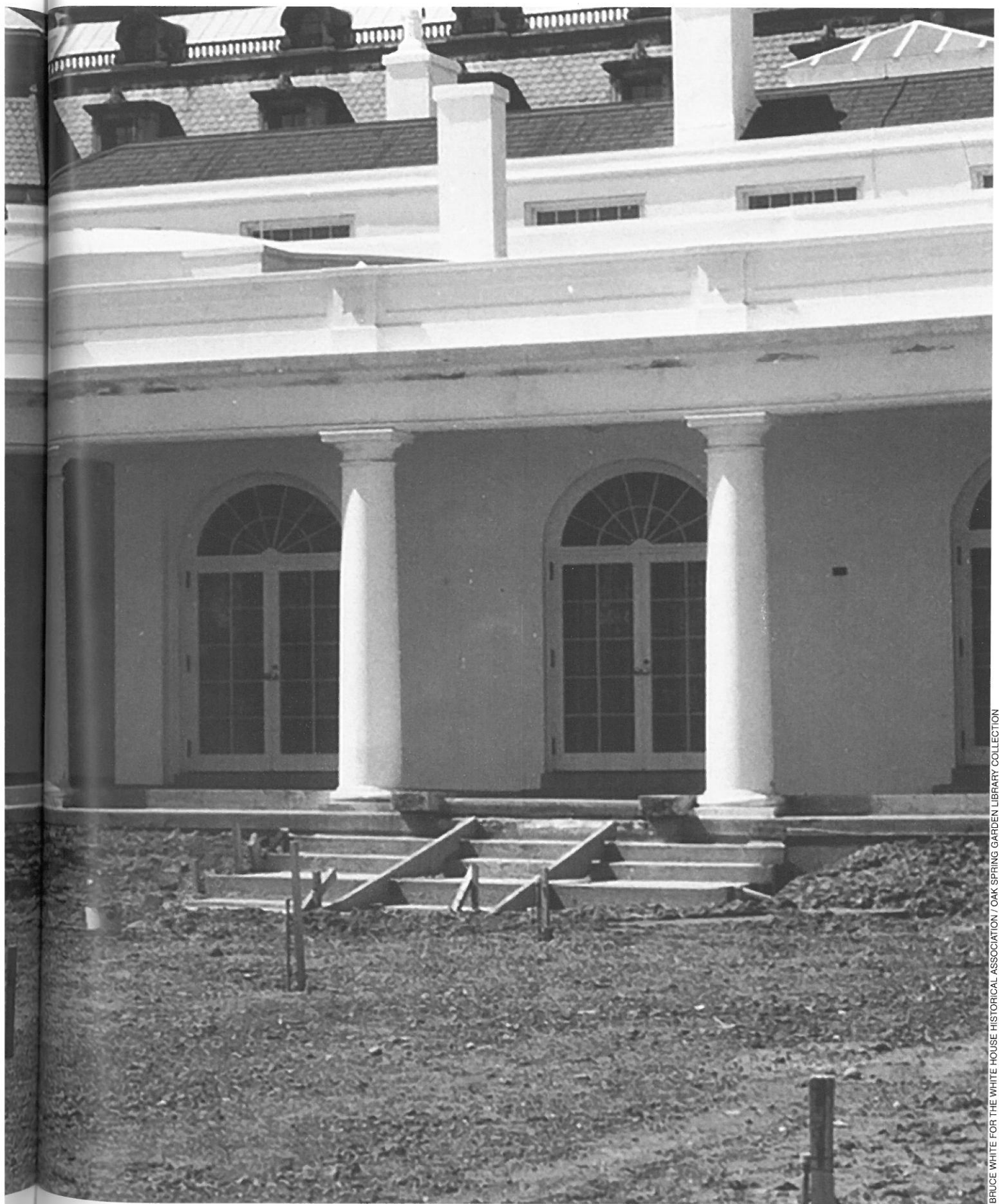


CORBIS



By early spring 1962, the cement footers for the new stage are in place and await sandstone facing as stakes mark the location of new sprinkler heads.

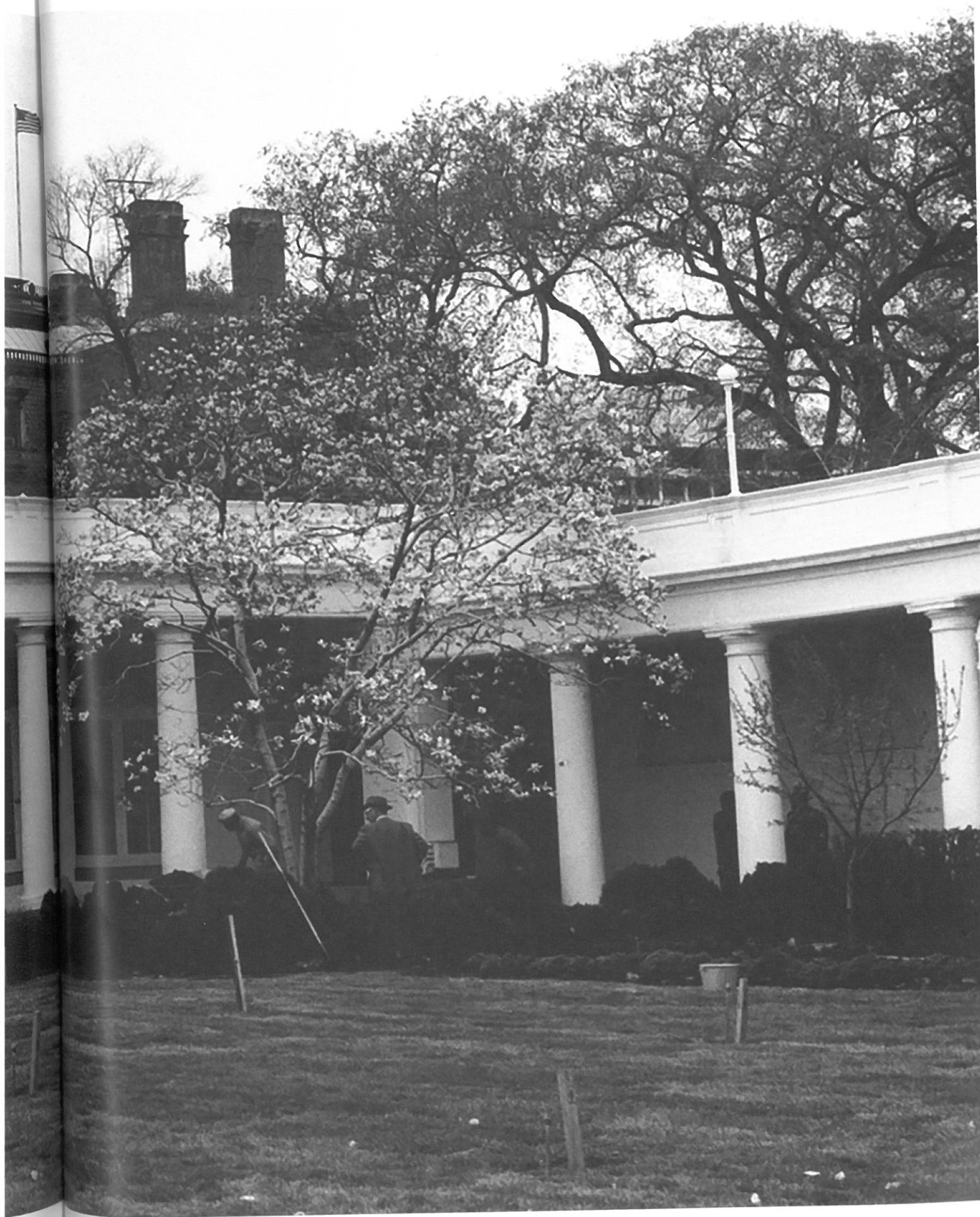




BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION / OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION

By early April 1962, the sod and boxwood are in place and the steps are nearly completed.



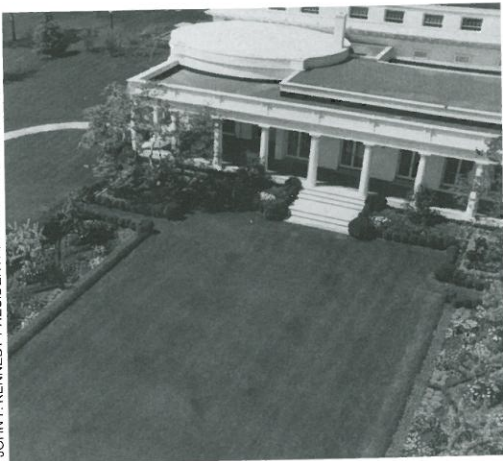


BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION / OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION

The Green Theater is Realized

Mrs. Mellon was successful in transforming the Rose Garden into the green theatre President Kennedy envisioned. The redesigned steps pictured below in April 1963 one year after the garden was finished became the presidential stage. A recent peek into the garden (right, c. 2014) reveals the timeless perfection of the concept.

JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

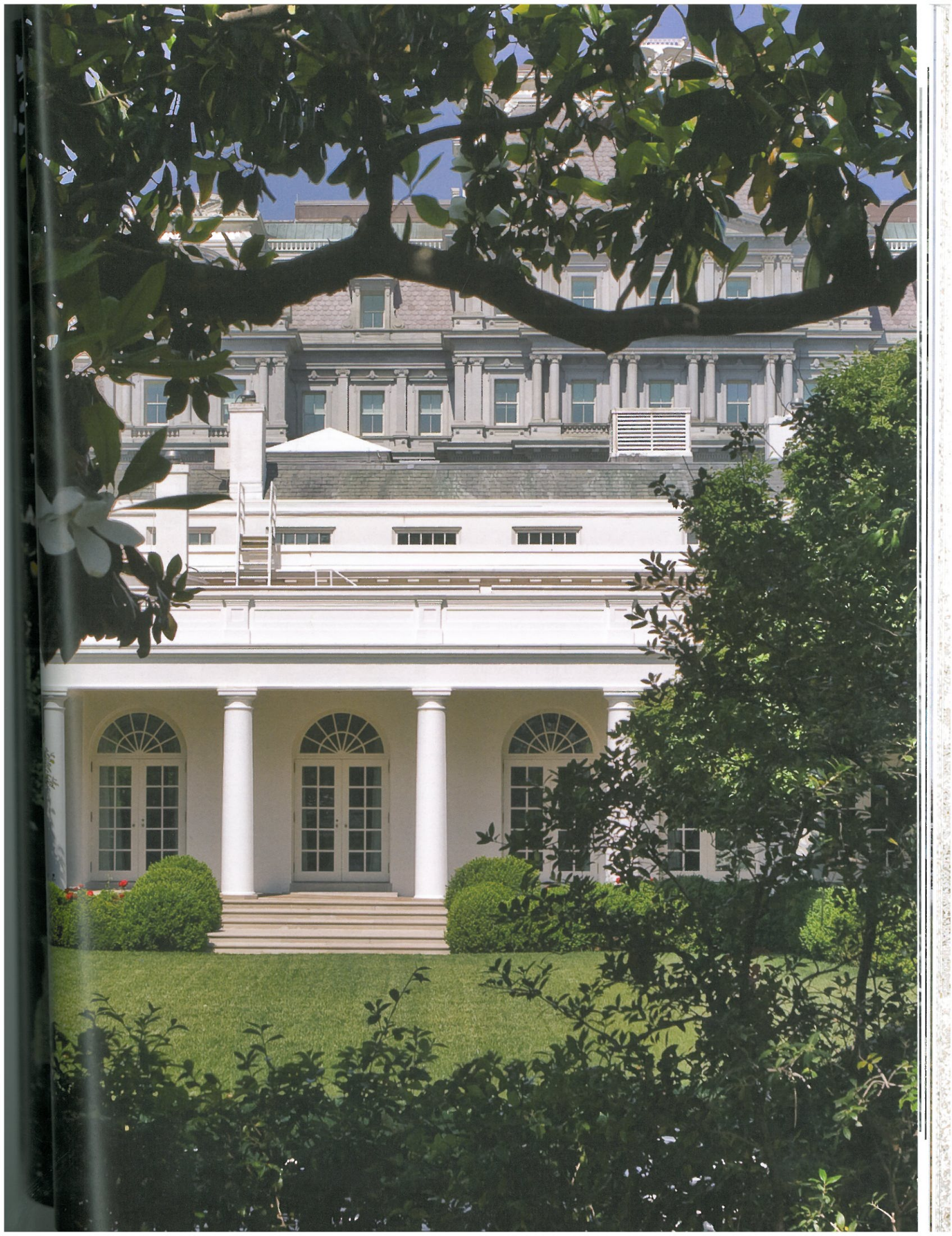


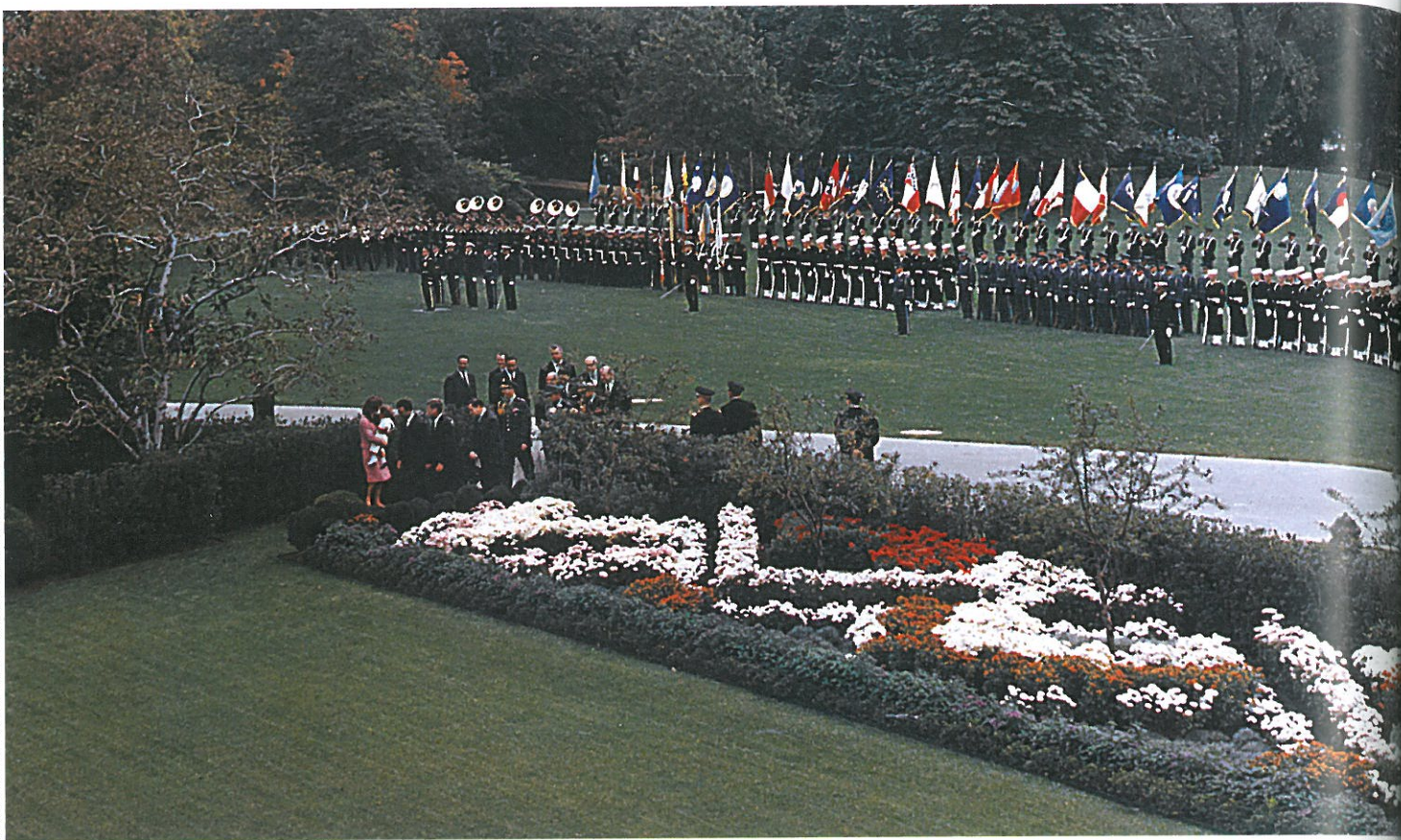
JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM



BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION







An article clipped from the *Washington Star* on May 8, 1962, announced that the “garden has bloomed back in to official business.” The first State Arrival Ceremony for a head of state to be held on the White House lawn was the welcome for Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria on October 15, 1962. Mrs. Mellon’s project was beautiful with its low boxwood “baskets” of fall flowers. Plans called for seasonal plantings, and Kennedy would enjoy four seasons there. The garden would be in its second autumn when he died. He was delighted with it, for its beauty also served his practical needs with the 50 by 100 foot lawn for ceremonies and its platform steps. Kennedy used it nearly every week, often more. The carpet of lawn, the long rectangle, was kept flawlessly green; a National Park Service lawn farm in Maryland provided fresh turf when spots turned brown. The lawn was framed by beds of colorful flowers of many seasonal varieties, indeed brilliant masses of color, from the blooming trees to the flower beds, all interlaced with boxwood’s green, blending with the green of the lawn, all open to the sky.



The first State Arrival Ceremony to be held on the White House lawn welcomed Algerian Premier Ahmed Ben Bella upon his arrival for talks and lunch with President Kennedy on October 15, 1962. First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy and her son, John Jr., (above) watch the ceremonies during which full military honors were bestowed on the premier (above, top, and opposite, top).



BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION / OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION



State Arrival Ceremonies continue to be held on the South Grounds following the tradition begun by President Kennedy in 1962. At left, President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom watch the U.S. Army Fife and Drum Corps pass during a State Arrival Ceremony in March 2012.

President Kennedy's Rose Garden Stage

The new stage, in the green theater that the Rose Garden became, immediately began to serve President Kennedy's purposes. On April 9, 1963, he addressed his guests at a ceremony to bestow honorary U.S. citizenship on Winston Churchill (below), in May 1963, he addressed the Council of the League of Women Voters (opposite); and on October 10, 1963, he presented the Collier Trophy to the seven Mercury astronauts (right).



ALL IMAGES THIS SPREAD: BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION / OAK SPRING GARDEN LIBRARY COLLECTION



A Half Century of Theater



Every president for more than fifty years has now made use of the green theater envisioned by President Kennedy and made a reality through Rachel Mellon's design. In September 1967, with his dog Yuki at his feet, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Food Stamp Extension Act in a ceremony set on the Rose Garden steps (above). In June 1971, President Richard Nixon's daughter Tricia was married to Ed Cox in a Rose Garden ceremony attended by 400 guests (right). On October 9, 1974, President Gerald R. Ford held one of many presidential press conferences to be set in the space (opposite).





GERALD R. FORD PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

As President Kennedy had imagined, the Rose Garden provides an ideal space within steps of the Oval Office for the president to welcome guests from heads of state to beauty queens to star athletes. Clockwise from top right: Jimmy Carter met with the Cherry Blossom princesses in April 1979; Ronald Reagan took a soccer lesson from Pele in 1982; Bill Clinton received golf tips from members of the U.S. Ryder Cup golf team in 1993; and George H.W. Bush welcomed sled racer Susan Butcher and her dog Granite in 1990.



JIMMY CARTER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM



GETTY IMAGES / DIANA WALKER



RONALD REAGAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM



WILLIAM J. CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY



GEORGE W. BUSH PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

The Rose Garden provided an elegant setting for a dinner held by President and Mrs. George W. Bush in the Rose Garden in celebration of Cinco de Mayo in 2005 (above). The annual Thanksgiving presidential turkey pardoning is traditionally held in the Rose Garden as seen right in 2010 when President Obama pardoned a turkey named Apple with daughters Malia and Sasha by his side on the steps.

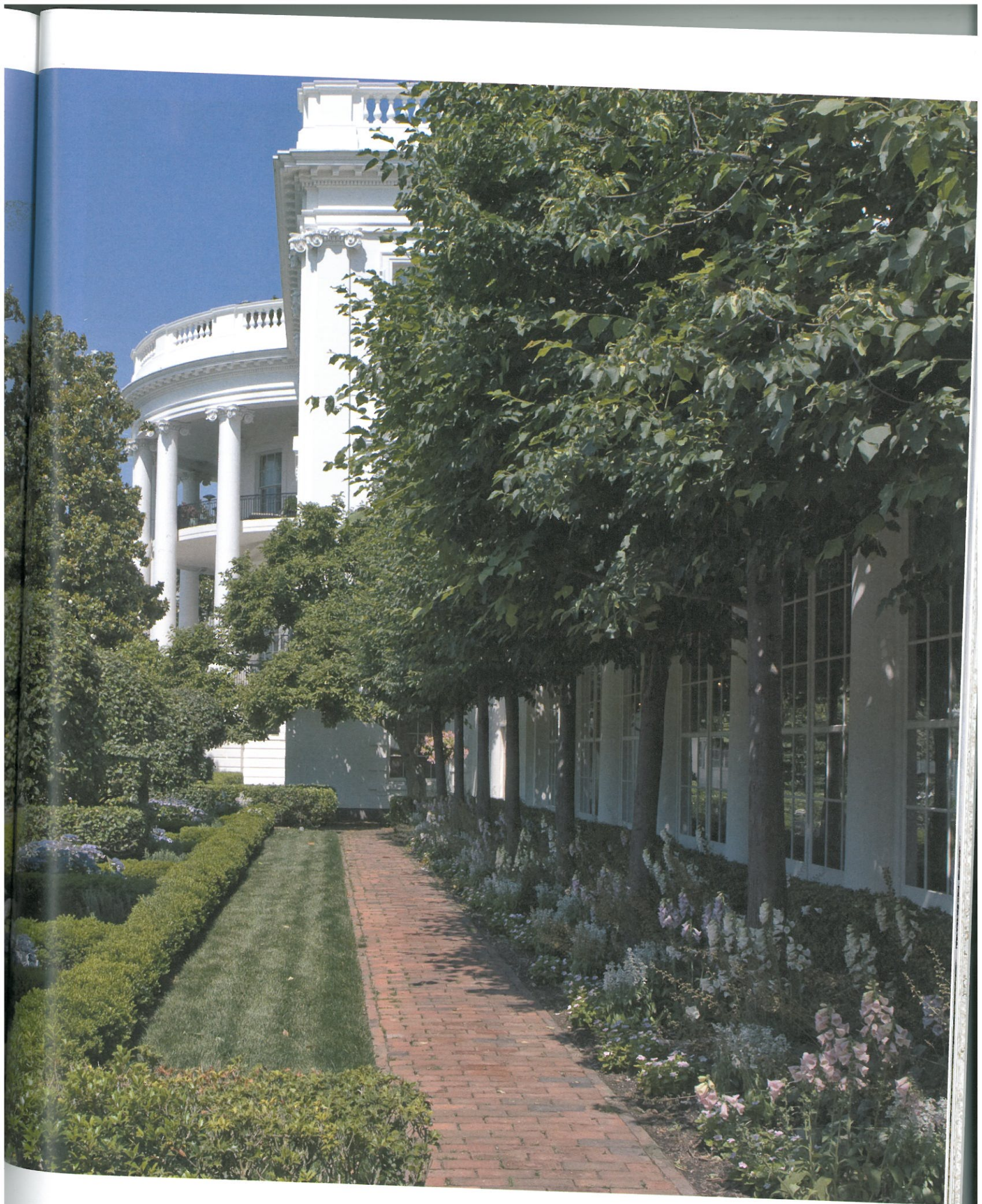


ASSOCIATED PRESS



During the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, Rachel Mellon supervised the redesign of the East Garden seen here in 2011. The East Gallery (top) was built with storm windows (never removed and still in place) through which guests and visitors admire the garden. The garden's sprawl is not evident except in photographs like this (above). Mrs. Mellon designed it to serve large crowds and individuals equally.



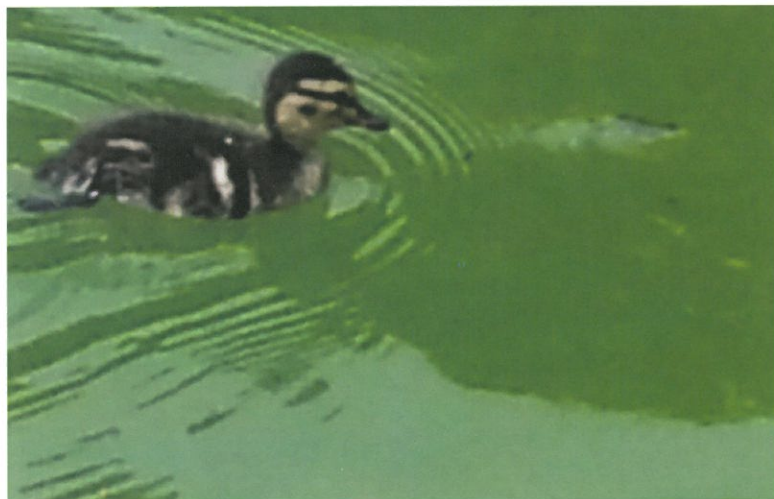


President Kennedy's Garden: Rachel Lambert Mellon's Redesign of the White House Rose Garden 75

WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



ASSOCIATED PRESS



Rachel and Paul Mellon donated two fountains to Lafayette Park, just across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, in honor of Jacqueline Kennedy. The duckling at far left is one of many Mallard families raised here each year. The Lafayette Park ducks are such neighborhood celebrities that in 2005, the Secret Service Uniformed Division even set up metal fencing to protect a mother duck and her nine eggs near the main entrance to the Department of the Treasury.

Mrs. Mellon went on to advise on every other part of the White House grounds. She supervised design of the East Garden, which provided a private family retreat and also a handsome view from the East Entrance corridor when guests came as tourists or for entertainments. She honored the memory of Beatrix Farrand in her design, but streamlined it with long grass paths, many holly trees and hedges, and abundant flowers. Jacqueline Kennedy was concerned that the tree planting on FDR's South Lawn berms had fallen too much into dark clumps. Mrs. Mellon and Irwin Williams counseled with her and developed a thinning program, keeping the security function that had inspired the berms but making protection less "unfriendly," as Mrs. Kennedy put it to Williams.

Mrs. Mellon brought flower gardening to the White House, almost obliterating Mrs. Wilson's earlier concept of green gardens. She brought flowers into the house in varied and creative arrangements, some even using vegetables, and she often served as instructor on modern arrangement in the basement flower workroom. She drew from basement cupboards long unused porcelain containers, vases, and soup

tureens, and made other containers out of old china tableware, terra-cotta flowerpots, and other unlikely storage artifacts. Today's tradition of varied floral displays at the White House was started entirely by her, replacing simple dome-like florist arrangements from the past with loose, multicolored bouquets.

Rachel Mellon was proud of her gardening and flowers at the White House. She spoke of the inspiring vision of the Kennedy administration and was happy to have been called upon to plant a garden that symbolized it. Her enthusiasm spilled over into adjacent areas, notably Lafayette Park, where she and Paul Mellon gave fountains in honor of Jacqueline Kennedy. The family friendship between Mrs. Kennedy and Mrs. Mellon continued to grow with frequent visits from Mrs. Kennedy to Oak Spring, where she kept her horse and loved riding in the Virginia countryside. The two women spent hours on horseback, Mrs. Mellon, loyal to her early mentor, always sidesaddle. When the president was killed, Mrs. Mellon took charge of the flowers at the White House and for his funeral at Washington's Saint Matthew's Cathedral.

NOTES

The biographical material and Kennedy details are from five interviews conducted by William Seale with Rachel Lambert Mellon, in 1982 and 1983; two were conducted at the White House and three at Oak Spring. Various conversations were also conducted by telephone. Other minor Kennedy details come from the press as reported at the time. The records in the Office of National Capital Parks, White House Liaison, Washington, D.C., were also incorporated.

Seale had both formal and happenstance conversations with Irwin Williams. The first in the former category was May 24, 1995, at the White House and a second took place on March 18, 1996. Seale saw Irwin Williams often at the White House and always took special note of conversations with him, as Irwin Williams has declined to give any other interviews.

1. The book Mrs. Mellon presented to Kennedy in 1961 was Edwin M. Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 1766-1854, with Relevant Extracts from His Other Writings* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1944). The original copy is in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston.