

**For a New Castle Beautiful:  
The Beginnings of Arasapha Garden Club and the Amstel House Garden**

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Arasapha Garden Club was founded 90 years ago on January 25, 1934. The story of Arasapha's creation begins with, and intertwines with, the story of the creation of the Amstel House garden.

In 1929 a group of New Castle residents formed a committee that purchased the Amstel House in order to convert it from a private house into a museum. The Amstel House Committee was chaired by Anne Janvier, who also organized and chaired the first Day in Old New Castle in 1925 and would become a founding member of Arasapha in 1934. Other members of the Amstel House Committee were Mary Shaw, Harriett Cavanaugh, Philip Laird, Judge Richard Rodney, and Governor Douglass Buck.

Two years later, members of the Amstel House Committee presented an idea to Brandywine Garden Club. On February 5, 1931, the Amstel House Committee sponsored a lunch at the home of Isabel Booth, followed by an afternoon of bridge at Amstel House. During the afternoon, Helene Layton, President of Brandywine Garden Club, was asked if her club might consider cleaning up and replanting the Amstel House garden.

By April 1931, the Amstel House Committee opened Amstel House as a museum, and Brandywine Garden Club agreed to undertake the Amstel House garden as its main project. Under the leadership of Helene Layton, plans were underway. Little did the club know how complex and expensive the project would become! When club members first visited Amstel House, they were dismayed to find the garden filled not only with trash and weeds but also two small shabby buildings--one a former bowling alley with a concrete slab floor that would need to be removed and replaced with soil. (A mystery is whether Helene Layton looked at the garden when she was at the Amstel House bridge party and agreed to consider taking on the project.)

By September 1931, Brandywine Garden Club was meeting with the Amstel House Committee about the garden project. The club would continue to work with the Amstel House Committee until 1938.

Brandywine Garden Club began work on the Amstel House garden in 1932. The club researched colonial gardens and initially considered installing a Dutch garden at Amstel House because of the Dutch heritage of Nicholas Van Dyke, a Delaware governor who lived there in the late 1700s. But they eventually hired Charles Gillette, a Virginia landscape architect, who drew up elaborate Colonial Revival garden plans for Amstel House.



*Charles Gillette*

The first part of the project was building a wall around the garden. Helene Layton was not only president of Brandywine Garden Club but also chair of the Historical Activities Committee of the Delaware Society of Colonial Dames of America. No doubt through her influence, the wall was paid for by the Delaware Society of Colonial Dames and the Delaware Sons of Colonial Wars. The Colonial Dames also contributed to the garden itself.



*1932 garden wall along East 4th Street*

The wall built in 1932 did not completely surround the garden. Part of the Amstel House grounds along Delaware Street were still occupied by the two small buildings housing a cobbler and the Board of Water & Light Commissioners. The Delaware Street wall could not be completed until those buildings were vacated and demolished. A temporary brick wall was built around the back of the buildings in the interim.

Work on the garden itself began in June 1932. Walkways were laid out—though not yet paved with bricks—and a variety of trees, shrubs, perennials, and bulbs were planted, including several hundred small boxwoods. Gillette supervised the work of installing most of the walls around the garden, the formal parterre garden, and some of the grounds behind the parterre. (A parterre garden is a set of plant beds laid out in a formal, symmetrical pattern, with paths separating the beds. The Amstel House parterre is unusual because it's in the shape of a butterfly.) Brandywine Garden Club also reconstructed the kitchen's distinctive "squirrel tail" oven. The rest of the garden could not be installed because of the two small buildings protruding into the garden.

In January 1933, Brandywine and Wilmington Garden Clubs merged. Wilmington Garden Club continued the Amstel House garden project under the leadership of Jean Kane Foulke duPont.



*Jean Kane Foulke duPont*

Meanwhile, Amstel House Committee members Mary Shaw, Anne Janvier and Harriett Cavanaugh jointly suggested creating a garden club. Garden clubs were very popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period women not only gained the right to vote but also became more vocal advocates for social reform. Women's clubs were organized to enable women to learn about, discuss, and influence social reform issues. Garden clubs were an outgrowth of the women's club movement. By the 1930s they had been formed in communities across the country. Arasapha was actually a late arrival to the national garden club scene.

In January 1934 Mary Shaw and Anne Janvier organized a meeting to form the "Amstel Garden Club." Mary Shaw, often credited as the founder of the club, chaired the first meeting on January 25 at Amstel House, with 27 women in attendance. Mary Shaw went on to serve as Arasapha president, with Harriett Cavanaugh as first vice president, through 1942.

We don't know why the name Arasapha was chosen. Newspaper accounts about the club's first meeting stated (incorrectly) that Arasapha is an old Indian name for New Castle. But the newspaper accounts did not explain why Arasapha was chosen as the club's name instead of the more obvious New Castle Garden Club. We now know that "Arasapha" has no connection to Delaware; it was the name of a fort in upstate New York. (For more information on the erroneous association of Arasapha with Delaware, visit [www.arasapha.org/about-us](http://www.arasapha.org/about-us).)

We do know why the name Amstel Garden Club was proposed and why it was rejected. It was proposed because some anticipated that the club would be founded to care for the Amstel House garden. When Mary Shaw announced the first meeting, she stated that "the chief interest of the club will be the Amstel House Garden and the beautifying of the grounds about New Castle historic buildings." She also noted that "the Amstel House Committee plans to work with the Wilmington Garden Club through this new club."

The Wilmington Garden Club, probably eager to hand off responsibility for the garden and end their years-long project soon, hoped for the same. A 1934 report to the Wilmington Garden Club said, "A Garden Club has been organized in New Castle to tend the Amstel House Garden and to promote the planting of old-fashioned shrubs, flowers, and vines about the village yards and doorways." And a 1938 speech by Jean duPont stated, "In 1934 the Arasapha Garden Club was organized, its chief objective being the care of the Amstel House Garden and of the Green and the grounds of other historical places in and about New Castle."

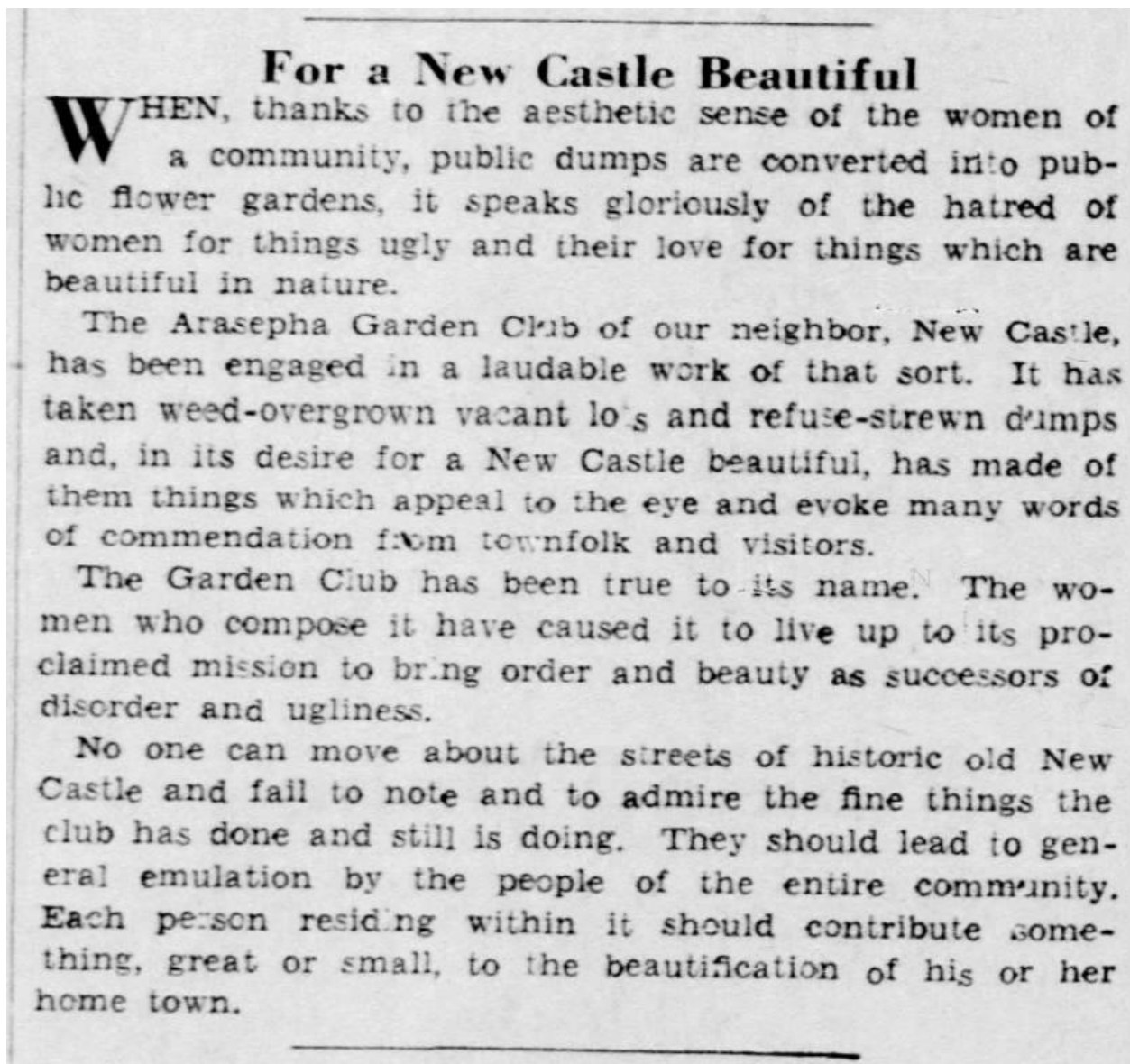
But Jean duPont's words were wishful thinking, and a different purpose emerged at Arasapha's first meeting: beautifying and improving New Castle. Minutes of the club's first meeting stated that its founding objectives were "(1) transforming of unsightly spots in and around our city, (2) to promote a deeper sense of civic pride among fellow townspeople, and (3) instill into the minds of our young people the preservation of plant life." The objectives made no mention of the Amstel House garden. The new club's focus on community improvement explains why Amstel Garden Club, the name introduced by Mary Shaw, was not adopted by the club.

There was clearly some controversy over this decision. A newspaper account of the club's first meeting said, "The club has no connection with the Amstel House garden plans but will be a community affair entirely." There must have been some conversations immediately after this was published! Just a week later, another newspaper account stated, "The club expects to interest itself in the garden at Amstel House and in beautifying other gardens and open spaces in and about New Castle."

But community improvement won out as the club's initial purpose. Later in 1934 Arasapha stated in a letter to the Trustees of New Castle Common that the club "organized for the purpose of cleaning and beautifying the vacant lots and approaches to the city." It would be

ten years before Arasapha assumed responsibility for the Amstel House garden. In the interim, the Amstel House Committee—Anne Janvier, Harriett Cavanaugh, and Mary Shaw, among others—continued to work with the Wilmington Garden Club on the Amstel House garden.

Arasapha immediately got to work on its three founding objectives. Meeting every other week through most of 1934, the club quickly began beautifying the city's open spaces. In its first year, Arasapha planted trees along New Castle's streets and beautified the Green, Veterans Triangle on Chestnut Street, and vacant lots. The title of a 1935 newspaper editorial commending Arasapha's accomplishments in its first year eloquently stated the club's focus: "For a New Castle Beautiful."



July 2, 1935, editorial in the Wilmington News Journal

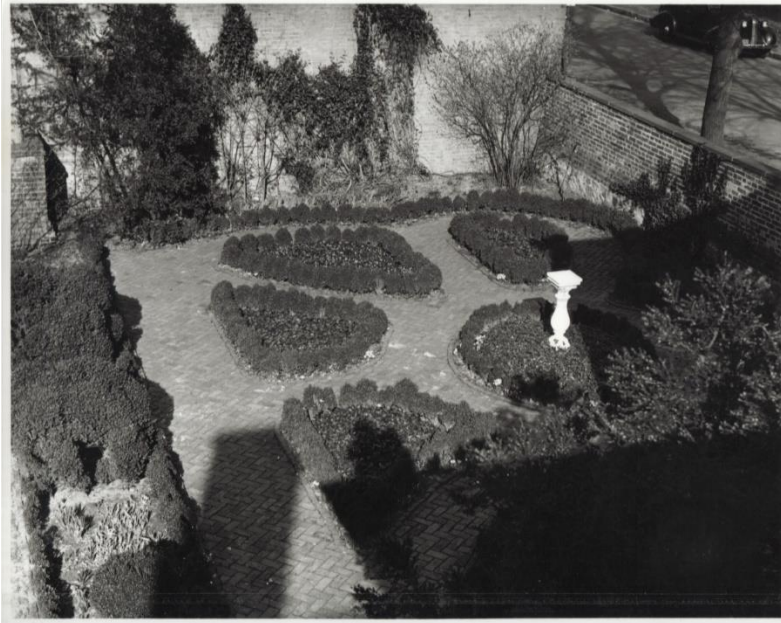
The phrase “New Castle Beautiful” had special meaning in the 1930s. A “City Beautiful” movement that began in the 1890s aimed at beautifying cities to improve the quality of life of their residents and spur economic development. The National Mall in Washington, D.C., is one example of a City Beautiful project. The editorial was thus praising not just Arasapha’s accomplishments to date but also its aim to transform New Castle through beautification of its public spaces.

Meanwhile, in 1935 New Castle Historical Society, now owner of Amstel House, purchased and tore down the adjacent cobbler’s shop, but the building housing the Board of Water & Light Commissioners remained. With the cobbler’s shop demolished, Wilmington Garden Club was able to complete several major projects in the Amstel House garden. Part of the brick wall along Delaware Street was constructed, garden gates designed by Gillette were added, and shrubs and brick walks were added to the former cobbler’s lot. Most significantly, a garden house was constructed in the rear of the garden, largely from salvaged materials.



*Amstel garden house today*

Wilmington Garden Club also continued work on the butterfly-shaped parterre garden. The club replaced the flowers in the parterre sections with ivy. In 1936 the club acquired a vintage sundial and pedestal from England and installed them in the center of the parterre.



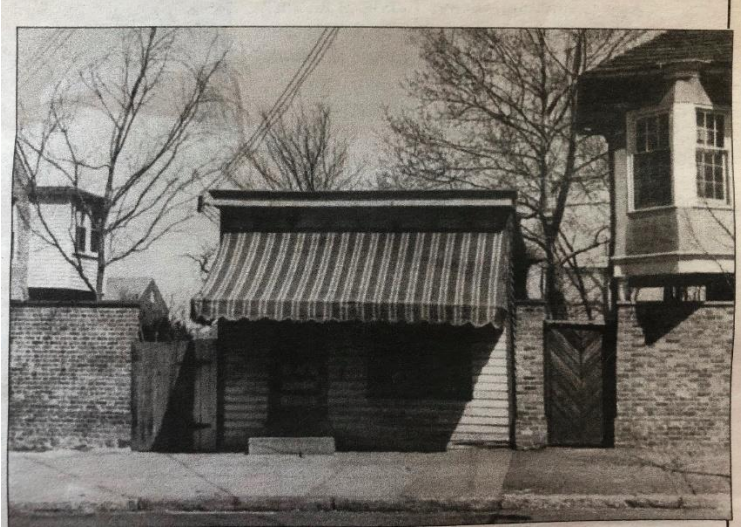
*Amstel House parterre garden in 1936. Note that the sundial is not yet installed atop the pedestal.*

The building housing the Board of Water & Light Commissioners was the only remaining obstacle to truly completing the garden. The temporary brick wall was rebuilt, this time to hide just that building.



*Temporary brick wall in the bottom left of this circa 1937-1939 photo of the Amstel House garden hides the Board of Water & Light Commissioners office, a corner of which is visible*

With no prospect of the Board of Water & Light Commissioners building being acquired and demolished in the foreseeable future, the Wilmington Garden Club deemed its Amstel House garden project concluded. The total estimated cost of the project was \$5000—the equivalent of \$100,000 today.



*Undated photo of the Board of Water & Light Commissioners building. Note the gate on the right, designed by Gillette. The bay window on the right was on the Amstel House; it has been removed.*

On May 2, 1938, at a ceremony at the Amstel House, Wilmington Garden Club handed over the key to the garden house to New Castle Historical Society. Arasapha, still not involved in the project, was not represented at the ceremony. Anne Janvier expressed gratitude to the Wilmington Garden Club on behalf of the Amstel House Committee.



## Club Project Completed



By Staff Photographer

Mrs. Irving Warner, president of the Garden Club of Wilmington, presents the keys to the Amstel House garden gate and tool house, to J. Rogers Holcomb member of the board of the New Castle Historical Society.

*1938 photo in the Wilmington Morning News*

At the ceremony, Wilmington Garden Club also handed over bricks and \$200 to complete the Delaware Street wall whenever the Board of Water & Light Commissioners vacated its property. Little did anyone know that it would be 35 years until the building would be vacated and torn down and the Amstel House garden truly finished. In 1973, the Delaware Street wall was finally completed and landscaping of the final section of the garden begun, this time under the coordination of New Castle Historical Society and Arasapha Garden Club.

## Hostesses at Historic Homes



Above are members of the younger set of New Castle as they will appear as hostesses at "A Day in Old New Castle" on Saturday. They are, left to right, Miss Diana Rogers, Miss Eliza C. Rodney, Mrs. Horace L. Deakyn, Mrs. Gordon Young, Mrs. Jaryl D. Siner, and Mrs. Everett Reynolds. They are seen at the sun dial in Amstel House garden.

*Arasapha members gathered around the sundial and pedestal in the ivy-filled parterre garden for 1938's A Day in Old New Castle, a few weeks after the garden was turned over to New Castle Historical Society (photo from Wilmington Morning News)*

*For more information on Arasapha's history, visit [Arasapha.org/history](http://Arasapha.org/history). For a self-guided tour of the Amstel House garden, visit [arasapha.org/amstel-house-garden](http://arasapha.org/amstel-house-garden). There are many holes in club archives! If you have any documents, photos, or information related to Arasapha's history, please contact us at [ArasaphaGarden@gmail.com](mailto:ArasaphaGarden@gmail.com).*