

I live across from the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens National Park, just inside the DC-MD line and off Kenilworth Avenue in Ward 7, Northeast DC, and I consider myself a lucky person. Spring evenings I sit on my porch and listen to the music of the spring peepers in the ponds. Summers I grab my camera and snap pictures of the pink lotus blossoms that rise out of the mud. In the fall, I stuff my hands in my pockets and go for a walk to enjoy the golden-brown cypress trees. In the winter, I admire the intricacies of seed pods.

If you've visited this park, a series of ponds first carved out of Anacostia River marshland over one hundred years ago, you've probably fallen in love with it yourself. Where else can you see egrets, osprey, waterlilies, fields of head-high lotus, and snapping turtles the size of stop signs without even leaving the city? "The Lily Ponds," as locals call the park, was created with care and has been preserved as a unique, cultivated wetland by people who passed the love on from one generation to the next.

The story of the beginning of the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens is about two very special people, Walter B. Shaw and his daughter Helen. Mr. Shaw was a native of Maine, a "Yankee" who came south to fight in the Civil War. In May of 1864 he lost his right arm in the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse. After recuperating, he took a job with the Treasury Depart-



Mack with snake and kids: Ranger Walter McDowney shares his love of snakes; With Junior Rangers at the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. (Photo from the archives of Rhedine Davis)

ment as an amanuensis, which was a fancy way of saying "human copy machine."

He became friends with the David Miller family, who had a tract of farmland on the outskirts of the District, out Benning Road and just across the Anacostia River on the old Anacostia Road (soon to become Kenilworth Avenue). W. B., as he is often called, married David's daughter Lucy, and in 1879



Helen Fowler with delivery truck: Helen Fowler with a delivery truck bought in 1912 for \$800. (Photo from the archives of Ruth Shaw Watts)

bringing a stable residential base that W. B. tapped for both a market and a workforce. Business boomed at Shaw's Water Gardens, and during the summer, workers were in their boats by 4 a.m. picking thousands of flowers to fill the day's orders. By mid-morning neatly packed boxes left the gardens

cense to make local deliveries. She took painting classes so that she could illustrate her plant catalogs. She often visited local women's clubs to share her expertise on aquatic gardening and to promote her products.

Her hard work paid off in beautiful gardens, a growing business, and visitors from around the city, the country, and the world. The Sunday picnic brunch at the gardens, perhaps on a blanket under one of the many weeping willows that then lined the ponds, became a staple activity of the Washington society scene. Presidents came to enjoy the beauty of the lilies and lotus flowers, and Helen counted their wives as her friends.

As early as 1919 Helen became aware that plans for swampland destruction and park creation along the Anacostia River might threaten her business. She engaged a series of lawyers to determine how these plans might affect her water garden. In the 1920s and 1930s the government sought to seize the ponds and all its natural and cultivated assets without compensation.

Helen loved her ponds too much to see them seized and possibly destroyed, so she engaged in a letter-writing campaign that caught the attention of government officials. In 1938 the government bought the water gardens from Helen, and it became a national park. Terms of the sale allowed her to reside in her house on the property, which she did until her death in 1957.

By the time Helen died, the neighborhood around her and her gardens had changed dramatically. "White flight" had come to the nearby suburb of Kenilworth, which transitioned to an almost exclusively African American community. In 1959, the 450-plus unit Kenilworth Courts complex was built adjacent to the gardens, bringing hundreds of new families into close contact with the park.

Pictures show that even early in the garden's history, African American gardeners worked at the ponds. One such gardener was Mr. Freddy Lundy. Hired while Helen Fowler was still alive, she passed on

The Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens

Loving Ward 7's Wetlands Park

Walter and Lucy purchased half of the David Miller farm, including 14 acres of Anacostia River marshland.

Not long after they had settled into their 1530 Kenilworth Avenue farmhouse, W. B. brought some water lilies from his native Maine and planted them in a pond on the edge of his swamp. Growing water lilies became his hobby. He cultivated new varieties, dug more ponds, and built a greenhouse.

Walter began to sell his water lilies and quit his job at the Treasury to become a full-time water gardener. In 1895 local farmland was subdivided to form the nearby white suburb of Kenilworth,

bound for local markets or for cities as far away as Chicago. Shaw cultivated a regional clientele of backyard water gardeners and also sold cut flowers to such clients as the posh Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City.

W. B.'s daughter Helen, who had grown up around all this aquatic activity, became her father's assistant. It appears that somewhere around 1912 she began to run the business herself. Having early lost both a husband and a son, she devoted herself to the ponds and plants that her father taught her to love. She traveled around the world, bringing back exotic species to add to her commercial offerings. She earned a truck driver's li-



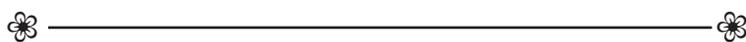
seed pods: Winter seed pods at the lily ponds. (Photo by Joe Lapp)

her love of the ponds to him as he learned the intricacies of water-plant gardening. He worked at the park for decades, taking care of the ponds and grounds well into the 1990s and passing on to new generations of gardeners the knowledge that Helen had given to him.

The park had always been a refuge and a natural playground for local residents, and the families and children who moved into the changing area neighborhoods found it no different. Cynthia Sharpe, who grew up in Kenilworth Courts, remembers the winter ice skating overseen by local adults and the summer outdoor slide shows that neighborhood families would

spread out their blankets on the grass to watch. She also remembers a large chestnut tree that would, at the crack of a shoe on fallen shell, yield its nutty fruit.

Another Kenilworth Courts child who took advantage of the aquatic gardens was Walter McDowney. Walter used the park as a natural laboratory, learning all about the animals and plants he found there. Soon after working a summer job at the park, the Park Service hired him permanently. Walter ran a Junior Ranger program for local children, passing on his love for and knowledge of the park to the next generation. In 1985 the Park Service honored him as the best park interpreter in the National Park system.



Mr. Lundy picking lily etc: Mr. Freddy Lundy, long-time gardener at the aquatic gardens, illustrates how water lilies were gathered when the park was a commercial water gardens. (Photo from the archives of Rhuedine Davis)

Another local resident who loved the park was Mrs. Rhuedine Davis. "This park is sacred ground to me," she wrote in a letter to a Park Service supervisor. Founder of a flower club in the East-

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New Hampshire Ave. Bridge, NE	Over Railroad	July 2006
Southern Ave. Bridge	Over Suitland Parkway	Aug. 2006
Taylor St. Bridge, NE	Over Railroad	June 2006
Eastern Ave.	Riggs Rd. to New Hampshire Ave. & North Capitol to Carroll St.	Oct. 2006
Reno Road	Military Rd. to Nebraska Ave.	Feb. 2007
Roosevelt Bridge	Over Potomac River	Nov. 2006
South Capitol St.	Between Martin Luther King, Jr. Ave. & Galveston St.	May 2006



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Government of the District of Columbia
Anthony A. Williams, Mayor

land Gardens neighborhood just to the south, Rhuedine helped to start the Junior Ranger program, brought attention to the needs of the park and organized community celebrations on the park's grounds.

Today, the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens protects the last native Anacostia River marshland in the city. The tradition of loving care for this special National Park is carried on by the park staff and by the Friends of the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, which helps to organize volunteer days and other events. The DC area Asian community produces an Asian festival that runs in tandem with the annual water lily celebration. Neighborhood children still play and learn in the gardens, with Discovery Creek teaching local elementary school students to appreciate and protect the lily ponds.

As well-loved as the park is, it does have its problems. Urban oasis, yes; pristine and untouched natural paradise, not quite. The urban pollution that plagues the Anacostia River finds its way into the park as well, and if you walk the recently constructed boardwalk you will see a wonderful tidal marshland tainted with floating trash and oily residue. Also, increasing vandalism in the park in the sixties and seventies necessitated the construction of a fence, a historical chain of events that many would like to see reversed.

But put those problems, and your own, aside next time you come to the gardens, and revel in the joy of natural space, the fragile beauty of a water lily bloom, how water beads up when thrown onto the conical lotus leaves. That's the way W. B., Helen, and all the others who have put their love into the park would like it.

If you want to help the Friends of the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, come to one of the regular 4th Saturday clean-ups or contact Alan Spears at 202.454.3384 or aspears@npca.org for more information. For information about other park events call the park at 202.426.6905.

Upcoming events:

- June 24** Volunteer Day (9 a.m. to noon)
- July 22** Water Lily and Asian Cultural Festival
- September 30** National Public Lands Day clean up and celebration

Buddha At the Lily Ponds

Kenilworth, DC
By Joe Lapp

Wind shifts water: brown, sky, brown.
Buddha pinks on a yellow lotus pod—
spot him, stare, see his breath
curl the leaves. He stays there,
suspended over water, despite
the oily crust, the human waste.

After all, it's not the river's fault
it cannot hum the tune of ships
and swimming holes—we did that
to ourselves. Buddha forgives us
but wants us to change. He'd fund
those big swirl tanks if he
ran things. He'd teach the children
not to throw their soda bottles
on the ground, tell the men
not to dump their oil down
the storm drains. Come to me,
he'd say, see the river made by God
for you, play the parks and ponds.

For now he sits and thinks.
It's enough to meditate, reach in,
find his own inner peace. An egret
slips in, silent, overhead: sky, white,
sky. See the breath of Buddha
buoy her wings. Believe.

The Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens is open daily from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more information contact park personnel at 202.426.6905. The author can be reached at lappjoe@yahoo.com or 202.397.3169. ■



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