



Andalusia

*The Centuries-Old Family Home
with a Storied Past Benefits from
the Dedication of Its Present Generation*

Marion Laffey Fox

LIKE MANY of Philadelphia's great estates, Andalusia Historic House, Garden, & Arboretum in Bensalem, PA, wordlessly defines the history of our young nation.

At Andalusia and other properties like it, estate owners alternated residences, from the city to rural estates along and above two of the area's most important waterways, the Schuylkill River and the 330-mile-long Delaware River. Thus, Philadelphia's wealthiest citizens were able to spend pleasant summers in the country away from the stifling urban heat. Later, the enclaves offered refuge during the devastating outbreak of yellow fever in 1793.

Much like the storied properties on the Potomac in Virginia and the Mississippi in Louisiana, Andalusia boasts a long and colorful history, highlighted by brilliant successes. Through it all, the elegant temple-like house, productive farm, and glorious gardens still thrive today.

It all began after the American Revolution, when Philadelphia was the capital of the new nation from 1790-1800, that the merchant John Craig bought 99.5 acres on a promontory 15 miles up the Delaware River from the city. Within two years of his 1795 purchase, local workmen completed his plans for a family residence.

Further improvements from 1807-08 were designed by Benjamin H. Latrobe,



who was the architect for the Capitol and White House in Washington, DC. Some years later, from 1835-1836, the “Big House,” as the home was called, received a major facelift under the guidance of Thomas U. Walter, who enlarged the structure, updated rooms, and most notably expanded the second story and added a soaring Greek Revival portico with fluted Doric columns. Following the marriage of Jane Margaret Craig to Nicholas Biddle in 1811, the couple enjoyed living in their country and town houses.

After the death of Jane Biddle’s mother in 1814 at age 53, Nicholas Biddle purchased Andalusia from his father-in-law’s estate for \$17,000. During this era, Nicholas Biddle served as president of the Second Bank of the United States, from 1823-1836, while launching several ambitious agricultural projects that included planting hundreds of mulberry trees for silkworm production and importing Guernsey cows for the first herd in the U.S. When he plunged into the complicated business of growing fine table grapes, he erected enormous glass houses to protect them. Remnants of this monumental effort appear as existing stone walls that supported the glass structures and shielded his grapes from frost, and contributed to their profitability until the late 1800s. Today, their ruins serve as invaluable wind buffers for the present open-air walled gardens.

Noted as one of the finest examples of Greek Revival architecture in the United States, Andalusia was listed on The



Top: *The Big House*, etching by Katharine Craig Biddle, c.1890.

Center: The Library at Andalusia.

Left: The White Garden, April 2022.





National Register of Historic Landmarks in 1966 and opened to the public in 1980. With its idyllic presence overlooking the glistening river, it represents a living history of gentrified rurality and of the families who inhabited the important waterside houses.

Populated by generations of the Biddle family, the estate was the home of many famous historic figures over the years. Avid horticulturist Letitia Glenn Biddle, wife of Nicholas Biddle's grandson, founded The Garden Club of Philadelphia—America's oldest garden club—in 1904, and in 1913, co-founded The Garden Club of America. She was passionate about promoting gardening opportunities for women, and the 1911 School of Horticulture for Women she

co-founded ultimately became Temple University's Ambler Campus, which offers a focused study of horticulture and landscape architecture.

Later, James Biddle returned to the house where he was born. He was described by his daughter, Letitia, as "a sixth-generation Philadelphian whose ancestor William Biddle... a friend of William Penn, came to New Jersey in 1681. Almost 300 years later, Jimmy Biddle served as president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and became an ardent vocal defender of landmarks such as Grand Central Terminal and the original exterior of the U.S. Capitol."

An ebullient and gifted speaker, he famously challenged outmoded preservation efforts in a 1972 issue of *Town*

Above: Andalusia encompasses 50 acres that include gardens, woodlands, and the Big House, welcoming the public since 1980 to share in its beauty and history.

& *Country* magazine, stating, "We must decide if we want to preserve what we have or if we just want to paint it over, high-rise it or factory it." During his tenure, membership in the National Trust for Historic Preservation rose exponentially. Previously, as curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he greatly expanded the American Wing's collection. When he returned to live at Andalusia, he devoted his energies to creating a foundation and opening the property to the public.

After Jimmy's death in 2005, his son James Biddle, known as Jamie, and wife



Above: James Biddle in the Walled Garden at Andalusia, 1981

Above Right: The addition of 14,000 new plants, shrubs, and trees by Lady Lennox-Boyd revived the look of Andalusia's gardens.



Kristin took over the estate. Happily for Andalusia, Jamie Biddle devoted energies to maintaining the estate, while Kristin's expertise in horticulture created an ideal family partnership. "Being immersed in nature is what I need in my life," she says. "My mom was an amazing gardener, and as children in the center of New York state, we were all about nature, helping in the vegetable garden, and other tasks we enjoyed."

An alumna of the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University, from which she graduated with a degree in horticulture, Kristin serves as an Andalusia Trustee, and Chair of the Horticultural Committee. This important group oversees multiple tasks involving the Lands Collection Policy, as well as stewardship of the Arboretum. Additional responsibilities include determining how trees are cared for, gardens are managed, the kinds of plants that are collected, and how the

riverfront and open spaces are protected.

Crediting experiences at Bartram's Gardens in Philadelphia, and Wave Hill, the 28-acre public garden in the Bronx, she says, "That, as well as the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, made me understand how important public spaces are as an inspiration for others."

Explaining that she had missed being outdoors when she worked in New York's fashion industry, Kristin recognized opportunities for creating something special at Andalusia. To that end, she and Jamie solicited the advice of English Garden authority Lady Arabella Lennox-Boyd to create a master plan in 2012. Five years later, the ambitious plan saw the addition of 14,000 new plants, shrubs, and trees along the Green Walk, which revived the look of Andalusia's gardens.

After the property achieved Arboretum status in 2020, the Biddles' team, including Head Gardener William Fuchs, staged Andalusia's first Garden Symposium in May of 2023. The outstanding event attended by more than 250 subscribers featured four renowned speakers at an all-day session. Headliners included Fergus Garrett, the spirited head gardener of the UK's Great Dixter House & Gardens; Annie Novak, urban farmer,

author, and educator who co-founded the nation's first green roof vegetable farm; Frances Palmer, an American potter known for her irreverent and inspired creations and a member of the illustrious design team of 1882 Ltd. in Stoke-on-Trent, England; and Xa Tollemache, the English garden designer who oversees the gardens at

Helmingham and worked on the Millennium Garden at Castle Hill in Devon.

The highly successful event not only showcased the remarkable accomplishments of Andalusia's preservation efforts in house and gardens, but the deep-seated love and respect for the estate by its current stewards, Kristin and Jamie, and their three sons.

Recently, during a quiet property stroll, Jamie reflected on their role in the estate's history. "I spent Christmas, Easter, and summers here, and it was always a special place for us. I lived in this house for 57 years. Things were simpler when my grandparents, and eventually my father, were here. We dedicated the Father's Garden to him, and have worked tirelessly to make it the special place it is. Now our overriding goal is to share this historic retreat in an even bigger way."

With that, the 7th-generation Biddle and his guests glanced back at the columned house rising above the gleaming Delaware. Beloved family seat, the sylvan estate of natural woodlands, walled gardens, gentle paths, scattered outbuildings and pristine animal barns attest to its illustrious past—and rejoice as it is poised to carry on for future generations to come.

