



The forebay and retaining pond (top, center) at the base of the 11-acre dell are precisely aligned with Thomas Jefferson's design grid for the University. (Photo by Will Kerner)

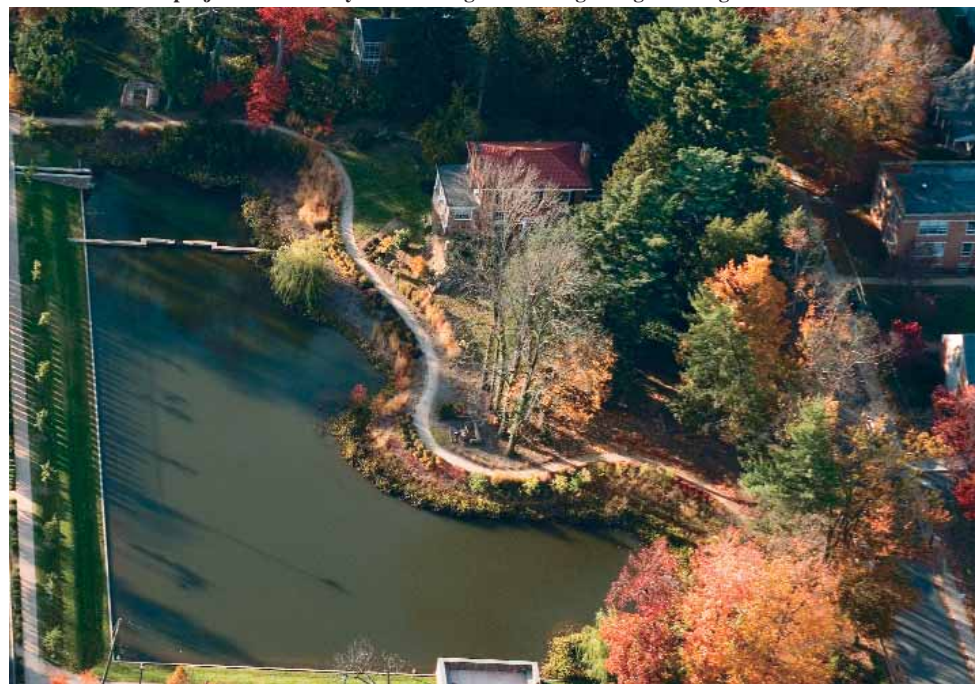
(Photo by Will Kerner)

The project is unified by a theme of geometric right angles facing the fluid curves of nature.

At the University of Virginia A Dialog at the Dell

by
J. Michael Welton

Photos courtesy of
Nelson Byrd Woltz
Landscape Architects



The story of the Dell at the University of Virginia is a tale told by a stream that flows through the intersection of nature, history and design. It starts, like everything else on the grounds there, with Thomas Jefferson's vision. He

bought the Dell's 11 original acres because he needed a reliable source of water for his school. Lazy little Meadow Creek, tumbling east down Observatory Hill and slipping quietly for a mile through its valley west of the Lawn, met that need.

"He wanted to control the water supply," said Warren Byrd, whose Charlottesville firm, Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects, recently transformed the Dell from soggy, derelict marsh into verdant, park-like plain. "The University is



The red brick and stone arch folly is part of a garden established in 1916 by former Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds William Lambeth. (Photo by Hara Woltz)

Among the plantings near water's edge are the purple-blooming pickerel weed, native to the Tidewater region of Virginia.



built on a ridge, and he couldn't get water up there regularly. So the Dell became a source for water and ice." Eight years ago, university landscape architect Mary Hughes charged Byrd's firm with transforming the space to demonstrate the first phase of a new water-management master plan. The team started on top of O-Hill, and worked its way down, precisely aligning its project with Jefferson's 200-year-old design grid.

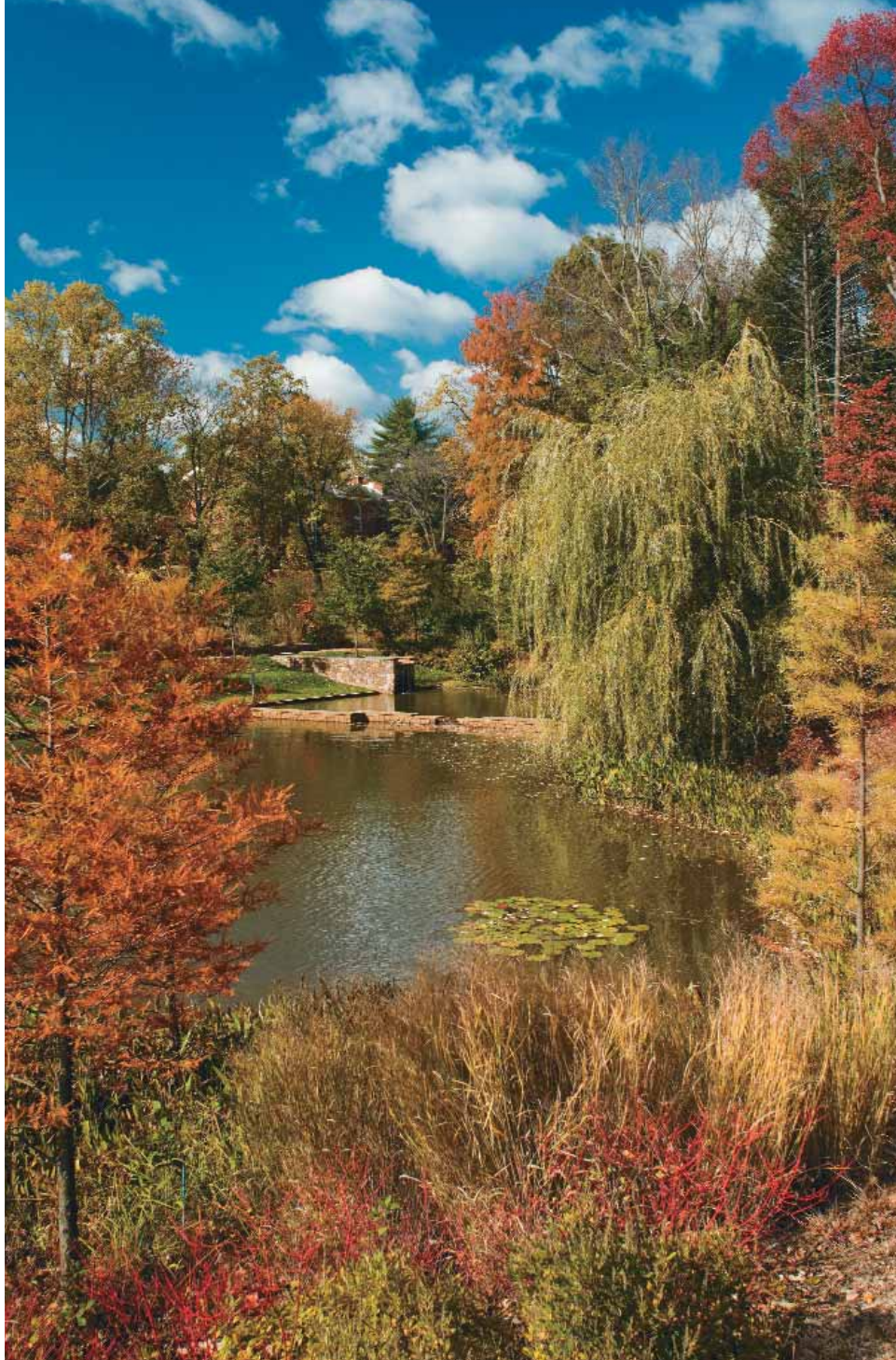
Meadow Creek commences, spring-fed, on top of the hill. There it runs parallel to the University of Virginia Cemetery, which is surrounded by a stone wall that proffered a key unifying element for the Dell's restoration. The taupe and purple-flecked stone wall spoke the site's native language. Byrd's firm hired the mason who had built a recent addition to the wall, and who had quarried the nearby stone himself. The team would amplify the voice of that stone when they resurrected the Dell below, with new walls, spillways

and retaining pond.

Walking down the hill, it's easy to envision the variety of water-related uses for this valley over the years. Jefferson not only tapped into the creek as a basic means of survival, but also staked out its fertile, stream-fed soil for farm plots assigned to faculty. "Throughout the 19th century, water was a really powerful, ever-present issue in the life of The University," Hughes said. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, the school began to meet its water and agricultural needs elsewhere. So the Dell, blessed with natural beauty and proximity to the Lawn, began to feed another kind of appetite: Golf links were established there. "You teed off up on Monroe Hill where Brown College is now," said Hughes.

Closer to The University, William Lambeth, an early 20th-century superintendent of buildings and grounds, built a home adjacent to the Dell in 1916. He added a garden, with ruins, that extended into the valley. The fragmented red brick and stone archway folly that stands there today, an iconic symbol for the Dell, was part of Lambeth's garden. "He was very frugal, and re-used artifacts from the area," Hughes said. "The archway came from a building in the vicinity."

By the 1950s and early '60s, one of The University's most ambitious earth-moving efforts in its history transformed the Dell substantially. The land was terraced, dormitories were built, and later, picnic areas and courts for tennis and basketball were added. Meadow Creek was forced into underground pipes. "The creek disappeared as a surface feature," Hughes said. The pipes steered the stream toward Memorial Gym, then north under Emmet Street. The water flowed under the road toward Barracks Road Shopping Center, then on to the Rivanna River, down to the James and finally into the Chesapeake Bay. The massive project solved potential storm-water problems and enabled fine living and recreational spaces,



Sediment from Meadow Creek is retained in the upper pond, or forebay; cleaner water then flows through a weir into the lower pond. (Photo by Darren Higgins)

but unintended consequences arose. Without the creek, water collected on top of the ground. "It was pretty wet," Hughes said. "There was nowhere for surface runoff to go. It was just a swampy area that was unusable."

It remained so for decades until Hughes selected Byrd's team, including project manager Kennon Williams, for the dual tasks of reestablishing Meadow Creek

above ground, and managing storm water with a retaining pond. "We daylighted 1,200 feet of the stream," Williams said. "We brought it up and re-engineered it." They completed the project in 2005, and it earned an Honor Award from the American Society of Landscape Architects in 2009.

Biohabitats Inc. provided engineering expertise for the stream restoration. Rain gardens now filter water



Water enters the forebay via a spillway, creating varying arcs of water that change with rainfall and the seasons.

like a sponge along the stream's edge. A pair of linked retaining ponds filters storm water in between Lambeth's house and Emmet Street. Sediment from the creek is now retained in the upper pond, or forebay, which is cleaned out periodically. Cleaner water then flows through a weir into the lower pond and empties under a sidewalk observation deck into the existing pipe beneath Emmet Street. Rain gardens now filter water like a sponge along the stream's edge.

The project's design is unified by a theme of geometric right angles facing the fluid curves of nature. The sharp, ninety-degree angle of the forebay and retaining pond just east of Lambeth's arch, addressing curves of native Virginia wetland plantings, demonstrates this tension. Then, just south of the pond, the pattern is repeated, with right-angled areas of lawn terminated by

The Dell provides a dialog between cultural and natural forms—a place where nature and society meet.



the streambed's curves of restored forest and plants. "It's a dialog between cultural and natural forms – a place where nature and society meet," Williams said.

This conversation is most dynamic where Meadow Creek meets the retaining pond in front of Lambeth's arch. There, water runs from the stream along a 20-foot stone channel, capped by Pennsylvania bluestone, four feet above the pond. Rushing water enters the forebay via spillway, creating a graceful arc of varying forms. If there's been a heavy rainfall, the arc is quite grand; if there's been little, it's barely a trickle. "This is not a fountain," Williams said. "This is a living system that changes with the rainfall and the seasons. It's an educational environment."

Indeed. Before Byrd retired from teaching at The University in 2005, he took his classes to the Dell to view native Virginia wildlife. The project arranges plants by regions – aligning those of the state with those of the site. Students walked near the pond among plants native to the Tidewater region, like the purple-blooming pickerel weed. From the tennis courts to the base of O-Hill, flora indigenous to the Piedmont region, like black-eyed susans, are planted. And the O-Hill area features trees from the mountain region, like the bigleaf magnolia with its bright white blooms.

"I used the Dell as an ecological botanical garden," said Byrd. "I could talk to students about the genus and species of the plants as we were walking through." Other wildlife has returned to the Dell too, just steps away from Emmet Street. A pair of snapping turtles has adopted the pond. Kingfishers can be seen twisting through the air there. A blue heron often stands at water's edge searching for fish. "All this happened because of the native plants," said Williams.

"It's a working landscape," said Byrd. "It's doing several jobs. It's accomplishing as many uses as possible."

"After the droughts over the past

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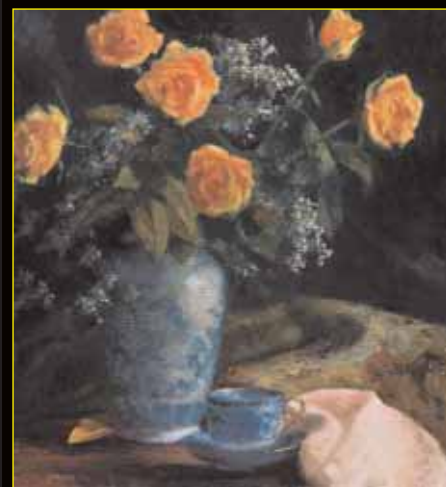
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five or six years, there's been a poignant change in our philosophy about water and how precious it is," said Hughes. "The Dell in its latest incarnation is a real celebration of water. We brought it out of the pipes and into the stream. We exposed it to air and sunlight – and it's been a real cleansing process."

For centuries, the water of the Dell has spoken to those who've used it. Today there's thoughtful evidence that someone listened well – and responded carefully.

Michael Welton's work on architecture and design has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Dwell*, *Interior Design* and *North Carolina Signature*. He writes from his home in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

Looking for Grasshoppers

Encourage Children Back to Nature

