

# Steele Burden and His Masterpiece:

# Windrush Gardens

Story by Peggy Cox



Strolling through historic Windrush Gardens, once again I contemplated the tremendous impact this wonderful gift from the Burden family has made on our region. I marvel at the majestic live oaks and ancient crape myrtles which create a shady canopy over the gardens for the copious azaleas and camellias and other favorite trees and shrubs of Steele Burden. Only special gardens created in another century can evoke such a sense of tranquility and peace and yearning for a simpler, less hectic lifestyle.

The story begins about one hundred and fifty years ago when the parcel of land in East Baton Rouge Parish known as Windrush Plantation was presented as a wedding gift to John Charles Burden and Emma Gertrude Barbee by her uncle William S. Pike Sr. The old Ward's Creek which meanders through the property reminded John Charles of the scenic Windrush River in the Cotswolds near London, England where the Burden family had come from, hence Windrush Plantation was named. Today the name is used in reference to the gardens surrounding the old Burden home. The land was used as an agricultural (cotton and corn) and cattle farm.

In 1895 William Pike Burden Sr., son of John Charles and Emma, married Ollie Steele and they had three children: Ione Easter Burden, William Pike Burden Jr. and Ollie Steele Burden. In 1905 Windrush Plantation, consisting of 600 acres, was transferred to William Pike Burden Sr. for \$3,000. At first the family lived in Baton Rouge

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near the state capitol and used Windrush as their country home, riding out for the weekend in their horse and buggy. In 1921 they renovated the old farmhouse on the property and moved permanently to Windrush. A modest house, it was typical of most plantation homes. Sadly, William Pike Burden Sr. died four years later.

After the death of William Pike Burden Sr., the family continued the development of Windrush Plantation. Miss Ollie, as she was affectionately known, lived to age 87, dying in 1958. After her death, the property devolved to the three children. All three lived most of their adult lives on the site, were well-liked members of the community and highly respected philanthropists. Lone, the only one to receive a college degree, spent the majority of her working career on the LSU campus and was Director of Student Activities from 1948 to 1961 when she retired. She never married and lived at Windrush with Miss Ollie and her brother Steele. Although interested in her brother's projects, developing the gardens and the Rural Life Museum, she let him make the decisions, helping Steele as financial advisor and backer. It was her accumulated funds that are now astutely used by the Burden Foundation. Lone died at age 87 in 1983 and is buried on the property where she had spent so many years.

William Pike Burden Jr., known as Pike, was a skilled businessman and civic leader who owned and operated a well known Baton Rouge printing company. He married Jeanette Monroe in 1922. Eventually they moved to Windrush, adding a new West Indies style home to the property in 1940. He died in 1965. It was during this decade that the Burdens began the donation of the majority of the property to LSU.

The youngest of the three children, Ollie Brice Steele Burden, better known as Steele, was born in 1900. He pursued his interests with unbridled enthusiasm and conviction. As an independent young man he traveled widely, often working his way to Europe on a steamer, or as a stowaway. He also made several trips to Latin America until middle aged. Steele was greatly influenced by the formal European landscapes, especially the Italian garden styles and the use of statuary as focal points in the gardens. His landscape designs over the years typically included formal elements such as symmetrically designed beds, individual garden rooms, allees, water features and garden ornamentation. Steele loved collecting beautiful and interesting objects and purchased many of his garden statues during his travels. Traveling broadened his innate artistic talents which he credited as being inherited from his grandfather. He was known for his natural talent and ability in several media with sketching, painting, photography and sculpture providing a creative arena where he could express his artistic sense. He felt his inherent need to be surrounded by beauty gave him the inspiration to create and his appreciation for all art forms allowed him to keep his creative spirit alive throughout his lifetime.

With encouragement from Miss Ollie, Steele first developed the garden area directly behind the house. According to John Monroe, nephew of William Pike Jr., "It was she, more than anyone, who inspired her children with an appreciation of heritage and a desire to preserve Windrush; and, as Steele Burden often said, a sense of duty to leave the world a better place."

What had been a pig pen was turned into a small formal garden with an open lawn and fish pond now full of water lilies. Sixteen feet in diameter, the concrete pond houses a woman pouring fountain, one of the first statues in Baton Rouge. The circular form of the pond establishes the symmetrical layout of the mondo grass edged beds which are abundantly planted in azaleas, bananas, banana shrubs, camellias, crape



▲ The old Burden home, Windrush, circa 1856, is today framed by live oak trees while sweet olive, bananas and azaleas flank each side of the house. Benches on the front porch invite one to rest and enjoy the vista.

**Opposite page top:** Summer means the ancient crape myrtles are showing off. An afternoon shower refreshes the garden and increases the chirping of birds and croaking of frogs.

**Opposite page bottom:** In the early 1990s, Steele Burden poses with his favorite plant, the live oak tree.

# Steele Burden's *Windrush Gardens* Plant Palette

**Trees:** Golden raintree, crape myrtle, Taiwan cherry, tree ligustrum, wax myrtle, southern magnolia, Oriental magnolia, spruce pine, loblolly pine, Japanese yew, sycamore, southern red oak, cow oak, live oak, bald cypress, windmill palm, *Vitex*, cherry laurel, American holly

**Shrubs:** Variegated Japanese aucuba, devil's walking stick, boxwood, *Camellia*, sago palm, golden euonymus, *Gardenia*, garden hydrangea, variegated hydrangea, *althaea*, burford holly, rotunda holly, yaupon holly, dwarf yaupon, wax leaf ligustrum, 'Jack Frost' wax leaf ligustrum, bush honeysuckle, *Mahonia*, banana shrub, dwarf banana, common banana, *Nandina*, sweet olive, mock orange, variegated pittosporum, Indian azaleas, dwarf azaleas, Indian hawthorn, roses, bridal wreath spirea, dwarf palmetto, cleyera, rice paper plant

**Groundcovers and Edgers:** Christmas berry ardisia, *Aspidistra*, Algerian ivy, false Indigo, mondo grass, *Liriope*, leatherleaf fern, southern shield fern, sword fern

**Others:** Chinese wisteria vine, bamboo, white ginger lily, Louisiana iris, daylilies

Steele's handcrafted garden house was the site for many tea parties and gatherings of friends. It also served as his art studio. The sunny island bed is filled with palmetto, butterfly plants, coleus and roses. ▼



myrtles, *Deutzia*, gingers, sweet olives and wax leaf ligustrums. From the lawn, five pea gravel pathways radiate out into other garden areas. Further back from the family home, Steele built a small brick garden house and surrounded the lawn area with live oaks and lush plantings. Often used for tea parties and gatherings of friends, it also served as Steele's art studio. Miss Ollie encouraged the planting of live oak allees along the roadways throughout the property.

In the 1930s Steele created a second, formal garden room surrounded by eight shrub beds with a large oval expanse of lawn in the middle. A towering red oak dominates from the outer edge while azaleas, boxwoods, gingers and sweet olives thrive in the inner beds. In these beds Steele left space for seasonal mums and begonias. An even larger area to the south was developed in the 1940s. Two large, historic urns serve as entry markers into this next garden room. Old aerial photographs define this large open oval as a vegetable garden in rows. Now existing in this space is yet another large expanse of lawn with a small circular bed of dwarf yaupon in the center surrounding a fountain. The entire area is again surrounded by shrub beds. Throughout these garden spaces, Steele incorporated niches with statues on brick pedestals and pea gravel pathways which guide you through the different garden rooms. The pathways around the perimeter of all these garden rooms help to define the different spaces and draw attention to the shrub beds. Some of these pathways emphasize the view into other garden spaces while others may focus on a niche with a statue. The majority of the land was left in trees and to Miss Ollie's cows, but some agricultural experiments and research projects began taking place under the guidance of LSU's College of Agriculture, continuing a lifelong tie between the family and LSU. This eventually led to the development of the LSU Agricultural Center's Burden Research Plantation now known as the Burden Center, encompassing 430 acres of green space in the middle of Baton Rouge. Some two hundred acres of the property remain in woods, containing one of the best examples of old growth hardwood forest in Louisiana.

What Steele Burden loved most was creating gardens. His need to create aesthetically pleasing environments led him to become a landscape designer by trade. In later years, he would describe himself: "I didn't want to be pinned down to where I couldn't do as I pleased, and I've always done as I've pleased." Steele attended LSU for a couple of years on and off before taking a job landscaping City Park in Baton Rouge. During this time he apprenticed under Mr. Cyfreud from the landscape architectural firm American Park Builders of Chicago for a couple of years. He served as superintendent and continued to perform advisory duties for the park until 1940.

Steele also joined the LSU staff in 1930 as the university landscape architect on a part-time basis at first, then full-time until his retirement in 1970. For 40 years Steele Burden and his crews were in charge of all the grounds on campus. His work included designing and installing planting beds, planting trees and maintaining the landscape. He directed the planting of the crape myrtles and most of the live oaks existing on LSU's campus today as well as at City Park.

Throughout his lifetime, Steele Burden designed many residential and public landscapes around Baton Rouge, most often for friends. His well known and constant landscape style utilized the creation of garden rooms, of open lawn spaces with well defined edges, live oak and crape myrtle allees, vistas and ornamentation. Mr. Burden's own Windrush Gardens gave him the space for his most complete landscape design expression. By dividing garden areas into smaller spaces with tree and shrub borders, Steele's garden rooms provide interest and intimacy in the garden, with each room offering an opportunity for a different design expression. Expanses of lawn are typically surrounded by curvilinear shrub borders outlined in *liriope* or mondo grass defining the edges. After incorporating organic matter into the beds, Steele filled them with his favorite hardy plants such as *Aspidistra*, *Nandina*, crape myrtle, azalea and *Camellia*. The Southern Indian Hybrid azaleas, well adapted to the Southern region of the country, were available by the late 1800s and he used them abundantly in his designs. Even though there are flowering shrubs and trees in his gardens, Steele emphasized the "green garden," using the form, color and texture of more permanent shrubs and trees, rather than flower color, to create the lush Louisiana atmosphere indicative of his style. Knowing colored foliage brightened up dark areas, in Windrush, he interspersed golden euonymus and gold dust aucuba among the azaleas. The canopies of mature live oaks, pines and magnolias now tower over these garden spaces giving protection from the sun and increasing the sense of enclosure.



Sculpture in the garden was a very important element to him and he often created special vistas and niches for their placement. Primarily mythological gods and goddesses, the bronze, marble, iron, zinc and concrete figures are tucked in among the foliage throughout Windrush. Steele was probably one of the first to use old sugar kettles as water features in the garden often with statuary in the center sometimes used as a fountain. He also liked to place old gas lights, benches and olive jars at strategic locations in the landscape.

After retiring from LSU he continued to develop new garden areas on the property. A grove of nearly mature pine trees planted by LSU forestry students years before, to the south of the original five acres of Windrush Gardens, gave him the opportunity to establish a more naturalistic, informal garden space. With help from longtime assistants George Raby and Malcolm Tucker, he laid out a system of gravel pathways meandering through the pines and formed irregular shaped beds for azaleas and camellias beneath the canopy. With the inclusion of statuary in this woodland setting, Steele established continuity throughout his gardens.

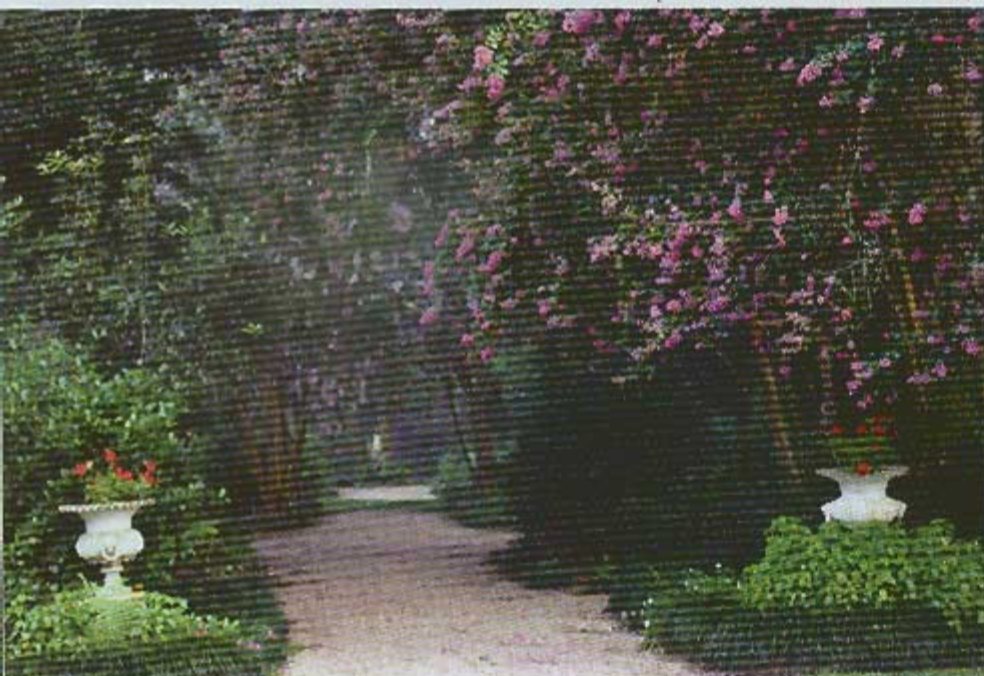
By the next decade, he further enhanced the gardens by adding two large ponds to the pine grove area, creating a beautiful addition to the entire plantation site. The ponds attract an assortment of wildlife, including Canadian geese and ducks. Two wooden gazebos with benches give protection from the elements and provide a restful retreat from which to appreciate the natural surroundings. Windrush Gardens now covers approximately 25 acres.

By today's standards, the plant palette used by Steele Burden at Windrush is fairly limited as he repeatedly used the plants which he first discovered during his early exposure to old Louisiana plantation gardens. These plants had survived and thrived for decades in the extreme climate of southern Louisiana. In the early days, he would

▲ Leatherleaf fern and Algerian ivy cover the ground on each side of the path leading from the back corner of the Windrush house, past the stone statue of Bacchus acquired in 1940, out to the large open pond.

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venture out into the woods to dig native tree seedlings, palmetto and yaupon to incorporate into his landscapes. Bananas, rice paper plants, gingers and giant elephant's ears enhance the lush, tropical feel. Large sweeps of *Ardisia*, *Aspidistra* and



English ivy thrive in the shade. Steele considered fragrance in the garden an important aspect and so he included, usually along walkways or near doorways, banana shrub, bush honeysuckle, butterfly ginger lily, *Gardenia*, sweet olive and wax leaf ligustrum. Color, as the final aspect in Mr. Burden's garden creations, is provided at Windrush throughout the year beginning with the breathtaking blossoms of hundreds of azaleas in the spring, crape myrtles, gardenias and roses in the summer, camellia sasanquas in the fall, Japanese magnolias and camellia japonicas in the winter. Annual and perennial garden color is now tucked away into several of the old borders around the Burden home. The LSU AgCenter was fortunate to acquire the old camellia collection of Violet Stone of Baton Rouge and many of these mature and unique camellias now grace Windrush Gardens.

Mr. Burden was actively supervising the development of gardens until his death at age 95. Before his death, his simple wishes for Windrush

▲ From the second garden room, two historic urns serve as entry markers into an even larger room developed in the 1940s. At this point, Steele increased the width of the pathways, creating access roads for garden maintenance.

Gardens were expressed in a video tape made by David Floyd, Executive Director of the LSU Rural Life Museum, adjacent to the gardens. He wanted the layout of the beds and paths to remain as they were, always keeping the paths cleared and not have anyone come in and drastically change the design. Due to lack of funds and garden staffing, Windrush had become overgrown and neglected for several years. Now, under the responsible stewardship of the LSU AgCenter's Burden Center, with funds and trained, dedicated personnel on site for the last three years, Windrush thrives as never before. So today, in spite of its age, the gardens remain the vibrant, yet serene and tranquilizing retreat Mr. Burden wished it to be.

▼ From the front porch of Windrush, looking past an island bed of petunias, Nandina and palmetto, the vista expands past the large, open lawn flowing down to the old Ward's Creek and the natural area beyond.

Ione and Steele Burden worked diligently for years to make sure Windrush would remain intact forever. By establishing the Burden Foundation to oversee the use of the land and donating the property to LSU with restrictions that it remain for horticultural research and gardens, they hoped this atmosphere of serenity, love of beauty, gracious courtesies and simple living would be available to the many citizens of our community and the many visitors who come to learn from it and to enjoy it. The Burden vision for Windrush House and Gardens is as written when the Burden Foundation was established: "The purpose of the Windrush House and Gardens is to provide a tranquil setting where one might pause to appreciate natural beauty and a simpler way of life from times gone by."

Late in life Mr. Burden was quoted as saying: "a live oak is the most beautiful thing to come out of the earth." Thanks to Steele Burden's abundant use of his favorite plant, the live oaks of Burden Center, including Windrush Gardens and the Rural Life Museum, stand today as grand reminders of another century for generations to come. ♡

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