

# A Labour of Love

## Colonial flowers at Munroe Tavern



Kristine Burton

By Laurie Atwater

Kristine Burton kept driving by the Munroe Tavern thinking that it would be so nice to do something with the garden that had been planted by its last resident (and Munroe family descendant) Ned Munroe. After he retired in the 1950s, Ned Munroe and his wife Eleanor moved to Lexington and lived in the house as the resident-manager until the 1970s.

"I kept thinking about how nice it would be to garden there at that historic location."

Burton says. In a series of well-timed events, Kristine was to have her dream realized. A member of the Lexington Field and Garden Club, she was stunned when at a meeting, then-President Harriet Hathaway said, "We have to do something about the garden at Munroe."

Burton immediately acted on the fortunate coincidence and volunteered her services to the Club and to the Lexington Historical Society that had taken over the property. "When we took it over in 1984 it had fallen on very hard times," she says.

"I went to the Historical Society and asked them what kind of a garden they might like—I thought they might like a Colonial herb garden, but they said they wanted flowers for the tourists."



Kristine wanted to create a garden that would be authentic for the times; it turned out to be much harder than she thought. "For a 1775 historic tavern—there was no information," she explains. She went to the library and tried to get information, but came up with very little. There was a lot of information about Williamsburg, but a real dearth of documentation about flower gardens in Colonial times.

"I really didn't know anything about garden history," Burton says. "I was learning all the time."

As luck would have it, just as Kris was beginning her investigation the Radcliffe Seminar program offered a series of classes on Colonial Boston landscape design. Burton explains that the seminars used information on actual gardens in Boston and the people who were known for keeping a beautiful garden.

"We learned to always let Colonial people speak for themselves," Burton says which meant she spent a lot of time researching primary documents like letters and diaries for clues about the plants that they might have grown. Burton has read the letters of Thomas Hancock, the son of Reverend Hancock from Lexington and learned that he ordered special plants for the mansion that he built in Boston. Plants are also noted in the letters of Samuel Sewall on "New England and the Indians." In which he describes many indigenous medicinal plants.

The vast majority of plants were typical of those grown in the colonists' native Britain where women often had gardens to attend to the needs of the family including a physike (medicinal) garden for creating remedies. Burton says that purely ornamental gardens were most likely not commonly grown,

but the practical household garden would have been alive with bright blooms and the fragrances of plants used for multiple purposes. Burton refers to the Ann Leighton book *Early American Gardens: For Meate or Medicineas* as a good resource along with lists of Colonial plants included at the Whipple House garden in Ipswich and the Boston Botanic Gardens.

I visited the garden on a lovely July day. A group of women from the Lexington Field and Garden Club haul their tools and weeding



Ellen Andersson-Smith, Kris Burton, Pam Northridge, Sue Hays, Betty Taylor, Janet Erickson, Lillian Cohen, and Joanne Fray (who takes care of the wild flower garden). Missing is Barbara Morgan.

baskets over to the Munroe Tavern to tend to the garden that Kristine Burton has brought back to life. They minister to the plants with loving care and celebrate new blooms. The women work away—staking up the delphiniums, dead heading the many rain challenged blossoms and generally tidying up along the well-ordered beds. Burton answers questions and makes observations as she goes along.

"We reshaped the gardens from the more modern configuration that Ned Munroe had here," she explains. "What I discovered is that Colonial gardens were geometric." The neat squares with generous walking paths are pleasing and easy to work. In among the mallow, the moss phlox, poppies and the tassel flowers are delightful names like Venus Navelwort and Johnny jump-ups. When she finds a new plant that is appropriate for the garden Burton usually has to grow it from seed as most nurseries don't carry the antique varieties.

"We have eight people working in the garden now," Burton says. "It's wonderful—people get attached to it and they come faithfully every Tuesday." Burton says she finds the gardens to be peaceful and therapeutic. Many of the women remind me to stop back frequently "because you never know what you'll find in bloom." I note that the phlox seems to be coming right along and Burton

says it will be blooming in August. A great reason for a return visit!

No one has been a more faithful steward than Kristine Burton who has nurtured and developed this site over the years. In the course of her research and her work she has developed a passion for the history of the Colonial era and the gardens they grew. "I feel that I have been reconstructing a jigsaw puzzle that was swept off the table for all these years," she says.

The puzzle has come together nicely, so stop by for a visit this Summer and enjoy the beauty of Colonial flowers.



Photos by Laurie Atwater