



## November 2025

October brought a wide swing in temperatures to our area and much-needed rain as well. It was so much more comfortable to be working out in the gardens and by the end of the month most of us were reaching for warm jackets before heading out in the mornings.

The focus for the garden volunteers and staff over the past few weeks has been seeing that the gardens and buildings are looking their best for the upcoming Crèche Festival which begins on November 17<sup>th</sup>. There has been a flurry of activity, and some of the action was captured in photos you will find here in this month's edition of the newsletter.

Garden volunteers had the opportunity once again to gather under the oak for the fall luncheon on October 29<sup>th</sup>. Photos from that event will appear in next month's newsletter.

As always, thanks so much to everyone who submitted photos and special thanks to those who graciously shared their memories and thoughts with us about a beloved tradition in their families, inspired by a wonderful gift to the Abbey.

This month's look into Mepkin's past is a bit lengthy and I do apologize. It is difficult to compress a historical figure's life into only a few paragraphs. If such things are of interest to you, it is my hope you can find the time to indulge in a few minutes of Mepkin "*her-story*."

-- LuAnne

***The Beat Goes On: Mepkin's Crews Keep Up the Good Work***



*Joel was tasked with a job in October that took him to new heights. Here he is seen preparing his chainsaw to cut away more segments of a large tree inside the Cloister.*

*Beat (cont'd)*



*Joel is seen here gliding his cherry picker into place to remove another portion of the tree.*

Beat (cont'd)



*Inch by inch Joel worked the chainsaw through the hard wood.*

Beat (cont'd)



*The next week all that was left of the tree is what you see here.*



*But a problem with drainage at this spot had to be dealt with, too.*

Beat (cont'd)



*Craig called this photo “Lil Jack in the Tractor Bucket.” For someone so young, Jackson is a seasoned veteran among our corps of volunteers, and we always appreciate having him come out and join us.*

Beat (cont'd)



*Volunteers had reduced what had been a very large pile of mulch to just a few buckets full ...*



*... but, as seen in this photo shared by Craig, another huge truck load was delivered soon afterward.*

Beat (cont'd)



*Chris was spotted about to toss another bucket of mulch at a site near the Labyrinth.*



*Carolyn and Gail spent a damp morning recently weeding and removing vines from beds around the Cloister.*

Beat (cont'd)



*Gator loads of limbs from the tree that was cut down in the Cloister had to be hauled away from the scene.*



*Replacement of the Visitors' Center front steps began during the third week of October ...*

Beat (cont'd)



*... and now sturdy new steps are in place and ready for the thousands of guests who will visit the store during the upcoming Crèche Festival.*

Beat (cont'd)



*Next year's crop of coleus has been started in the greenhouse.*



*Woody vines collected by Barb will become decorations for this year's Crèche Festival.*

## ***Spotlight on the Labyrinth***

The most photographed garden during the month of October was surely the Labyrinth. The swamp sunflower that grows there put on a spectacular show this year. As is so often the case when photos are taken of the Labyrinth, the scene that is even more spectacular than the garden is the sky above it.



*We have Phil Pacsi to thank for these two photos of the garden in bloom under a sky that promised some much-needed rain.*

*Labyrinth (cont'd)*



*Craig and his wife spent a weekend on retreat at the Abbey and captured the early morning sky above the Labyrinth in these photos.*

*Labyrinth (cont'd)*



*An indescribably beautiful, multi-colored sky greeted early risers at Mepkin Abbey in this photo also taken by Craig.*

*Labyrinth (cont'd)*



*And here's another lovely shot of the morning sky courtesy of Craig.*

## *Happening in Other Spots Around Mepkin*



*John Kadlecik shared his photo of a beautiful cluster of a type of shelf or bracket fungi growing in a crevice of a tree near the Retreat Center.*

*Happening (cont'd)*



*Mexican Sage with its long spikes of velvety flowers is really pretty this time of year. Phil was kind enough to share this photo.*



*The purple flowers of the Mexican Sage --heavy with raindrops -- are gorgeous in this photo, but the bright yellow glow of faraway sunflowers in the Labyrinth is even more impressive.*

Happening (cont'd)



*Thanks, Ursula, for this photo of summer bloomers in the raised beds in the Cloister. Despite the change in season, these Zinnias continue to put forth lots of colorful blossoms .*

*Happening (cont'd)*



*Mother Nature may have decided to do a little decorating of her own in St. Clare. Moss draped over this brick pillar did add a touch more interest in this photo from Linda Chiaponne.*

***By Special Arrangement***



*Fr. Guerric worked Mexican Sage into an arrangement for Sunday, October 26th, that was already full of an eclectic mix of offerings from Mepkin's gardens. Thanks, Ursula, for providing this photo.*

## ***Spotlight on Another of Mepkin's Hidden Ponds***

Last month's newsletter featured photos taken by Paul Meyers of the lovely water lilies floating in a pond located just beyond the mushroom house. I had the opportunity to visit another pond recently that lies beyond the last of the old chicken houses. Nailed to a tree near the water was a sign that read "St. Joseph's Landing." An old boat and other items were on the ground near the water. It is a fairly large pond that wraps around the site of the landing and beyond what can be seen from the shore. It's a lovely spot, teeming with life, some of it dangerous for sure. Whether the pond was formed naturally or manmade was a question that came to my mind. Does anyone have more information or stories about this site that they could share with the readers of the newsletter?. We would love to hear from you, if you do.



*This scene is looking across the pond from the landing.*

Pond (cont'd)



*A weathered sign marks the site of St. Joseph's Landing.*



*This photo of the pond was taken toward the right side of the landing...*

*Pond (cont'd)*



*...and this photo was taken looking to the left side of the landing.*

## *Reflections*

Marianne's photo of the Memorial Arbor's twelfth Station of the Cross in last month's newsletter prompted two other volunteers, Paul Meyer and Linda Chiaponne, to share warm remembrances of this Catholic tradition of meditative prayer that is known as the Way of the Cross. The practice involves individuals or groups moving along a path marked by a series of fourteen images or carvings that depict the final hours of Jesus's passion and death. Moving from one station to the next, the participants pause before each image and meditate upon it through specific prayers and reflections. The practice is especially meaningful for those who participate in the tradition during the season of Lent.

Paul says he remembers attending solemn services of the Stations every Friday evening during Lent when he was growing up. For him it was a very moving way to reflect on the holiness of Lent in preparation for Easter. And, like the Labyrinth, Paul believes the Way of the Cross is a very good way to do deep reflectance. He adds that the addition of the stations in the Memorial Arbor is one more of the Abbey's many gifts to us.



## Reflectons (cont'd)

Linda recalls, too, that the Lenten practice of going to church every Friday night to pray the Way of the Cross was as much a part of her life as going to Mass every Sunday with her family. It was also part of the reason Easter is still her favorite holiday (and holy day). It's a way for her to walk along that path with Jesus. After all, she reminds us, without Good Friday there could be no Easter Sunday.

Paul also shares with us some of the history behind the Way of the Cross. He says this very humbling Catholic meditation tradition goes back to the fourth century and that St. Francis had his hand in today's design. To that he adds that most Catholic churches will feature the fourteen Stations of the Cross depicting the path Jesus walked from the Lions' Gate to Mount Calvary as part of their architectural design.

Paul went on to say that there are many sets of traditional prayers surrounding the Way of the Cross and that he hopes the Abbey store will carry some of the booklets containing various versions of the associated prayers so that visitors to the Abbey can experience the meditation gifts of the Way.



## ***A Sketch of Martha Laurens, the Girl Behind the Legend***

Remember school field trips when you were young? They were always fun, right? That's the idea behind this month's look into the history of Mepkin. Later in this article we are going "off-campus" to visit sites well known to an important figure in a story often told about Mepkin and its inhabitants.

Before we go afield, however, we will begin with the retelling of the story familiar to anyone who has taken a tour of Mepkin Abbey or read a biographical account of Henry Laurens. The story (dare I say *legend*) sounds a bit like something out of a Gothic novel. So much so that it made sense to do some digging (I hope you will soon pardon the pun) to learn whether the legend was indeed fact. And if it is, who exactly was this tiny figure in the legend. Through the ages, and even today, tellers of the tale have been confused about her rightful place on the family tree. In some narrations she is Henry Laurens' sister, Martha, but in others it is his daughter, whose name was also Martha.

If her husband can be relied upon to have gotten the story right, it was Henry Laurens' daughter, Martha (Patsy as she was known to the family), *not* his sister, that is the little girl in this frightening tale. According to her husband, Martha (born November 3, 1759), contracted smallpox when she was only a year old. As was the practice at that time, the poor child was placed in an unventilated room where she -- by all appearances -- succumbed to the dreaded disease. Her little body was taken from the room where she had passed and placed near an open window while her family moved quickly to prepare for her burial to prevent further contagion. However, before the family had the opportunity to remove her body to the burial site, the family physician arrived on the scene and found that his young patient was still alive, probably revived by the fresh air flowing through the open window. From there, the tale switches the focus to her father, Henry, who because of this horrific event became so afraid of being buried alive himself that he became the first non-native person to be cremated in America. The story usually ends there, and we are left to wonder whatever happened to little Martha after she was spared a terrible fate.

## Martha (cont'd)



*According to the legend, the bluff above the ponds outside Luce Garden is the spot where Henry Laurens' cremation took place.*

### ***So, What Did Become of Little Martha?***

Despite growing up the daughter of Henry Laurens and all the prestige that brought her, the rest of Martha's life was marked by a series of tragedies and misfortunes. She was one of only four of her thirteen siblings that would live to adulthood. Her older brother, John, would be killed in the Revolution and her little sister, Mary, would die from the complications of childbirth. When she was only eleven years old her mother passed away. Left with three sons to educate and businesses to run, her father turned her care and that of her little sister over to his brother and sister-in-law. When she was fourteen, Uncle James and Aunt Mary moved to England taking Martha and her little sister with them. Later they all moved to France where Martha opened a village school when she was 20 years old. From late 1780 and all through 1781, she was faced with the tremendous challenge of getting help for her father who was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

### Martha (cont'd)

When her uncle died in France, she finally returned to Charleston after a ten-year absence along with her aunt, her little sister, and John's daughter. That same year, 1785, she met the man she would marry, Dr. David Ramsay, her father's physician. She was David's third wife. He had been widowed twice before. They wasted no time starting a family, Their first child was born ten months after their wedding.



*Martha Laurens married David Ramsay on January 28, 1787, in a ceremony held at Mepkin Plantation. She was 27; he was 37.*

She lived the rest of her life in Charleston in David's house at 92 Broad Street. There she gave birth to eleven children, most of whom lived to adulthood. She also raised her stepson and John's daughter. She died on June 10, 1811, and was buried in the Circular Congregational Churchyard where she had been a long-time member.

By all accounts David was an educated, well-respected man, as well as a devoted husband and father, but their marriage was always plagued by serious money problems and financial losses. She was forced to give up the rights to two properties she had inherited to satisfy her husband's debts.

## Martha (cont'd)

Years later the rest of her inheritance (\$25,000) was wiped out when the Santee Canal project they were heavily invested in failed. In 1798, David was forced to declare bankruptcy and in 1803 her only surviving sibling, Henry, Jr., sued her and her husband for the full amount they owed him in bonds.

### ***Martha's Significance in American History***

In 1791, Martha began a secret diary, recording deeply religious thoughts as she made her spiritual journey through life as a wife and mother. Just a few days before her death, she told her husband about the diary. Before the end of the next year, a memoir David Ramsay wrote about his wife was in its second publication. The work was a short biography of Martha and excerpts from her letters and that secret diary.

There have been fairly recent biographies written about Martha. Having been born into one of the Lowcountry's most prominent families, she became nearly as important to the study of American history as her father, brother and husband, but in a very different way. Scholars and historians have for years studied her letters and excerpts from her diary to help them paint a picture of the times in which she lived. Her writings opened a window into the life of a woman who was experiencing, and living out with great conviction, the beginnings of a new age for the young nation that her father had so tirelessly served, and her brother had fought and died for. Such perspective has rarely been available from women who lived in those times.

Because of her correspondence and other writings, we see that just like the men in her life, Martha wondered just what this new nation -- in which all men were created equal -- might offer her, a woman, in terms of individual rights and freedom. Early on she became determined to leave her mark on the new nation and found a way to do it through the only means available to her: as a devoutly Christian mother raising the next generation of Americans in the newly formed Republic.

Martha (cont'd)

***Walking in Martha's Footsteps***

The neighborhood in Charleston that Martha called home, where she raised her children, and where she attended church is within a few steps of The Four Corners of the Law.



*David and Martha Laurens Ramsay lived in this house at 92 Broad Street.*



*Dr. Ramsay was the first physician in Charleston to inoculate against smallpox, the disease his wife had suffered as a baby.*

Martha (cont'd)



*A few doors down from where she lived with David is the Laurens-Rutledge House (117 Broad Street), the home of the aunt and uncle who raised her.*



*Martha's grave can be located easily in the Circular Congregational Churchyard (150 Meeting Street), if you first locate this monument.*

Martha (cont'd)



*A badly worn ledger stone is all that marks the grave of Martha H. L. Ramsay, who as a child became a “living” legend.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The book Martha’s husband published about her is now part of the public domain and can be viewed in its entirety on the Library of Congress website. You can also find a portrait of her as a young girl online.

Bibliography

Gillespie, Joanna Bowen. *The Life and Times of Martha Laurens Ramsey: 1751-1811*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Ramsay, Martha, David Ramsay, and American Sunday-School Union. *Memoirs of Martha Laurens Ramsay, who died in Charleston, S. C., on the 10th of June, in the 52d year of her age*. [Philadelphia, American Sunday-school union, 1845] Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/13005734/>

“Women of the Laurens Family,” *Carologue: A Publication of the South Carolina Historical Society*, Fall 2024

## ***Contemplating the Month Ahead***

On November 11<sup>th</sup>, we have the privilege of honoring those who have served our nation as members of the Armed Forces. To all the veterans among us at Mepkin Abbey, ***THANK YOU!***

We will also be celebrating Thanksgiving which comes late again this year -- November 27<sup>th</sup>. And in the spirit of a season of counting our blessings, the volunteers of Mepkin Abbey are tremendously grateful for the gift of two new gators donated by Craig's parents, Hill and Karen Clark.



*Karen Clark stands next to the gators she and her husband, Hill, so generously contributed to Mepkin's garden volunteer program. Words cannot adequately express how grateful we all are to have them.*

\*\*\*\*\*

***Happy Thanksgiving, Everyone!***