

Garden Guide Tour Script

Starting Point – in front of Garden Services Center

Welcome to Airlie Gardens! We are a 67-acre public garden owned and operated by New Hanover County. Airlie is a historic southern garden filled with beautiful plantings, some of which are over 100 years old. The Garden was established at the turn of the last century by Sarah and Pembroke Jones, as a private getaway showplace. You will experience the same garden environment that Mrs. Jones' guests would have enjoyed in coming to her house for a party. Traveling through this natural woodland garden, you will glimpse the lake through the woods and azaleas, admire the camellia garden and stand in awe on the great lawn as you gaze at the 467-year old Airlie Oak (established 1545).

Airlie offers much more than a showcasing of horticulture and history. Located on Bradley Creek, a tidal saltwater creek, the Gardens are a great resource for understanding the ecology of Southeastern North Carolina. History, horticulture, and ecology will be the major themes of this morning's/afternoon's hour-long tour.

Henry Walters: Airlie and the Atlantic Coast Line (Model House)

In this area we have a replica of what the Airlie House may have looked like, it would have been slightly more extensive than this model, but photographers had a difficult time fitting the entire house into one shot. Once we move deeper into the lower part of the gardens, you will see where the house would have stood. The Airlie home featured an indoor tennis court that also served as a ballroom, a library filled with over 1500 books and rare volumes, a solarium for flowers and a telephone room where the first private residential telephone in New Hanover County was installed. The rambling mansion was filled with heirloom artifacts, sculptures, mahogany furniture, paintings and assorted artwork from all around the world. Much of the décor at the Airlie House was collected by Mr. Henry Walters and delivered to Wilmington by train.

Henry Walters was son of William Walters; a Baltimore investor and art collector, who after the Civil War gained control over several southern railroads, including the W&W (Wilmington and Weldon Railroad) and many others (approx.. 32) that all came to be known as the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad (ACL). The W&W railroad was established in 1834 and was considered a critical link in the "lifeline of the Confederacy," because it

serviced the blockade runners trading in Wilmington, which was the last confederate port to fall.

William and his son Henry made frequent trips to Wilmington where Henry quickly established a strong friendship with Pembroke Jones and wife Sarah (original owners/designers/tenants of *Airlie* gardens), around 1890. In 1894 William Walters passed away and Henry took charge of the ACL railroad system which was now headquartered in Wilmington. It is said that Henry then created the Atlantic Coast Dispatch, a consortium of coastal railroads that pooled freight cars, thus expediting the transport of produce from the “Winter gardens” in the south to the cities of the Northeast. Walters partnered with friend J.P Morgan, owner of the Southern Railway Company, thus dominating the southern railways. Ultimately, Henry had controlling interest of over 9,000 miles of track, which included the ACL, the Plant System of Florida and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. Henry’s dear friend, Pembroke Jones served as a railroad director for the ACL and had a small town on the ACL line named for him: Pembroke, NC.

Henry and the Joneses were such good friends that Henry sometimes managed facets of his railroad work from the mansion at *Airlie* and the “Bungalow” at Pembroke Park (now known as Landfall), during his long stays with them. In 1919 Pembroke Jones passed away; Henry Walters remained close with Sarah during this hard time and in 1922 Sarah and Henry were married. The couple always considered *Airlie* their favorite home. Walters ran the railroad until his death in 1931 with the help of his nephew Lyman Delano.

During this same time a smaller steam train railway; Wilmington Seacoast Railroad, was used to get back and forth between Wilmington and Wrightsville Beach. However, in 1902 this railway was taken over by Tidewater Electric Company; owned by Hugh MacRae, and converted from steam to electric; and thus the electric “Beach Car” was born. In between *Airlie* and Pembroke Park sat MacCumber Station, which served as the nursery grounds for *Airlie*’s Azaleas, and would eventually become one of the 22 stations along the Beach Car line that would bring famous visitors of the Gilded Age to the Joneses’ residence. Their guests included the Florida development tycoon Henry Flager, the socialite Henry Lehr, Illinois Central Railway owner Stuyvesant Fish and his wife Mamie, and several members of the prominent Vanderbilt family.

Airlie Oak

The Airlie Oak is a 468-year-old live oak. It was here when Native Americans called this area home. It has survived the Revolutionary War, the Civil War and stood through countless storms and floods. This tree is the heart of Airlie Gardens. Many celebrations take place under the Airlie Oak.

You'll notice a lot of Spanish moss in the Airlie Oak, as well as something called resurrection fern. Resurrection fern, like Spanish moss, is an epiphyte and does not hurt the tree. It grows in warm climates, and can survive dry spells by going dormant. While the plant looks dead, it is alive and conserving valuable water and nutrients. When enough water is available, the ferns awake from their dormant state, hence the name resurrection fern.

You can always identify a live oak by picking up a leaf and flicking it with your fingernail—the live oak is the only one that will click as you touch it.

You can see many of Airlie's stunning azaleas from the Airlie Oak. In fact, the "Queen's Luncheon" during the annual Azalea Festival in April is served around this tree. At one time, Airlie is said to have had between 300,000 - 500,000 azaleas. Today we probably have somewhere around 100,000. Although they are quite common now, azaleas were once considered rare and valuable. The fact that Sarah Jones had a garden full of them is quite remarkable

Minnie Evans Sculpture Garden

The Bottle Chapel was designed and built by Virginia Wright-Frierson in 2004 as a tribute to the work of Minnie Evans. **Interesting Facts:** there are 95 mosaics, one for each year of Minnie's life. There are 2800 bottles. From an aerial view, the entire garden looks like a flower, with the sidewalks being the stem and leaves, and the chapel as the bloom. Many artists contributed the other sculptural work surrounding and incorporated within the chapel. There is an informative book about the construction of the chapel in the gift shop.

Minnie Evans worked at the house under Mrs. Jones, and her husband, Julius, was a coachman and property manager for the Joneses. When the Corbetts purchased Airlie, they opened it up to the public, and Mrs. Evans was hired to work the ticket booth. The story goes Minnie saw a vision when she was 43 years old that told her to paint or die. Over the years she created many of her works from the ticket booth that still stands on the grounds. Her work is

known for its bright colors and exotic plants, with eyes and faces emerging from the foliage. She would sometimes use oils, pastels, crayons, and watercolors, all on the same canvas. She was inspired by her dreams and visions, as well as by the gardens and possibly oriental rugs and artwork in the Jones home.

Her work can now be found in art galleries all around the world, and here in Wilmington at the Cameron Art Museum. This sculpture garden is dedicated to her. Minnie Evans was gatekeeper at Airlie from 1949 to 1974.

Tranquility Garden/ Butterfly House

The garden plots of the Tranquility garden are arranged around Centennial Plaza with its columns and the fountain, and kept up by local landscaping companies. This plaza was dedicated in 2002, the 100-year anniversary of the creation of Airlie Lake, a dammed tidal creek.

The Butterfly house was completed in April of 2010. In the late spring and summer months, it is filled with Native and naturalized flower species that attract butterflies. Butterflies look for two different types of plants: 1) nectar plants which provide adult butterflies with the nutrition they need; and 2) larval food plants which are essential for the fast-growing caterpillars. Each species of butterfly is attracted to particular specie(s) of plants, and an adult female butterfly will only lay her eggs on a larval food plant that she knows her future caterpillars will be able to eat. Airlie's butterflies are take flight during the months of May through October. Our environmental department will raise native species of butterflies to fill the house. These butterflies will include Monarch, painted ladies, gulf fritillary, and black swallowtail.

Causeway over the lake

In 1884 Sarah Wharton Green married Pembroke Jones in Fayetteville. Later that same year, the Joneses bought a parcel of land and a recently built waterfront inn on the old Wright estate, which would become the core of the Airlie property. At the time of Jones' property acquisition, there was no bridge to Wrightsville Beach and no Intracoastal Waterway. People came to this area to be near the sea. The small inn on the property was called the Seaside Park Hotel. In 1886, Sarah Jones purchased Seaside Park for herself for \$1,250, and during the years that followed transformed the hotel into a rambling mansion. Mr. and Mrs. Jones also had a house in downtown Wilmington, known as the

Governor Dudley Mansion, as well as houses in New York and Newport. They never lived here permanently, but after a fire in their Wilmington home in 1895, they moved to Airlie for a short time. Over the years Mrs. Jones made constant improvements to both the house and the gardens. Mr. Jones is the one who named the land “Airlie” after his ancestral Scottish home.

It was the Joneses who created this 10-acre freshwater lake in 1902 by damming up what was once a saltwater marsh area. The lake provided a water feature to mirror the blooms of the thousands of azaleas that surround it in the spring. (In non-blooming seasons explain that what looks like underbrush is really azaleas surrounding the lake.) The wooden bridge that used to cross the lake here had planters spilling over with yellow Lady Banks’ roses just like the ones you see here today. This flower is very common in southern gardens. The original wooden bridges were removed circa 1960.

The lake is a favorite place for migrating waterfowl in the winter. All of Airlie provides excellent habitat for a diverse array of birds, and these resources have earned Airlie the honor of being on the North Carolina Birding Trail. One species that is quite easy to recognize is the redheaded woodpecker. You may have already seen or heard some foraging for insects. One of the symbols of Airlie are the mute swans, which are almost always on the lake.

With the lake and the salt marsh, which we will see later on in the tour, water quality is something we value here at Airlie Gardens. In fact when the county purchased the garden in 1999 for \$10.5 million dollars, a good portion (\$2.5 million) of the money came from the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund. To help filter polluted runoff from entering the lake we have built a Water-Wise Garden at the head of the lake to absorb and filter stormwater runoff. Throughout the year school groups take part in our environmental education programs and learn about water quality issues, plants and soils. The Environmental Education Program at Airlie Gardens serves 2,000+ schoolchildren each year. We have also planted certain areas of the garden with plants that help remove pollutants from the water and prevent runoff. A requirement for the landscape staff is to be a licensed pesticide applicator and we practice integrated pest management (IPM). We only use chemical pesticides as a last resort, and when we use them we select ones with the lowest toxicity.

Pergola Garden

As you enter the Pergola Garden, please notice that the garden starts to turn from a natural woodland to a more formal garden as you approach the site of the original house. This area is known as the Pergola Garden, and most of the columns of the stone pergola that you see here are those originally placed here in about 1904. Sarah Jones traveled widely and introduced many classical elements in her garden, such as the statue of Pan the wood nymph at the end of the Pergola. It has been said that most of the ideas for the garden came from Sarah Jones herself, but in 1906 Mrs. Jones hired German landscape gardener Rudolph Topel to implement her ideas. He was sympathetic of her vision for naturalistic landscaping. The steps entering the water would have facilitated getting into small boats that were used by the guests.

One could imagine that the Pergola Garden might have been a romantic spot for a southern lady to escape the watchful eye of a chaperone. Today, the Pergola Garden is often used for weddings. The confederate Jessamine (native to China) vine covers the top of the structure, and it is surrounded by azaleas and fall-blooming sasanqua camellias. In the gardens surrounding the Pergola we are always adding plants to give us almost year round blooms. The natural grassy isle way was developed during the Corbett ownership by Mr. James Ferger, hired by the Corbetts as a grounds consultant. It was originally named the “Four Seasons” or the “Waddell Walk” (after Waddell Corbett) but is now referred to as the “bridal Walk.”

Mystery Grave

The gravestone here is a bit of a mystery. The gentleman buried here, known as “John Hill,” was a Frenchman who was a tutor for the children of the Bradley family, who owned what is now Airlie in the 1800’s. The true identity of the gentleman is not known, he never wanted anyone to know his background, all he would admit was that he was from France. It is thought that he was a marshal under Napoleon who might have changed his name on escaping to America. Thus we have the haunting inscription, “Known in Eternity”, and the date 1835. It is said that Sarah Jones planted the first flowers of Airlie at this sight to honor Mr. Hill.

Walkway towards Camellia Garden

Along this walkway you can see some of the trees that are common throughout the gardens. Most of the pine trees that you see here are loblolly pine. Another common tree that you'll see is the southern magnolia. Its scientific name, *Magnolia grandiflora*, describes it well. The flower of the southern magnolia is one of the largest flowers in North America, reaching up to twelve inches in diameter. If you live in the south you'll probably recognize the fruit of the southern magnolia. The scarlet seeds are attractive not just to people, but also to birds, squirrels, and opossums who feed on them. In the course of the last several hurricanes we have lost hundreds of trees, which once provided a thick tree canopy to shade the garden. Once the canopy was lost, many sun-loving vines have sprung up and have become a real maintenance problem for our gardeners.

Something else you have probably noticed on our walk is all of the Spanish moss hanging in the trees. Spanish moss is misnamed. It is not Spanish and not a moss. It is actually a native epiphyte, meaning that it gets all of the water it needs from the surrounding air and gets nutrients from accumulating organic matter. It does not hurt the tree. It is the only bromeliad cold-hardy this far north.

The green floating plants covering some parts of the lake are duckweed. It actually oxygenates the water while it floats, but once it dies and decomposes, it depletes oxygen and can cause fish kills.

As we approach the Camellia Garden, to your right just before the Lebanon Entrance you will see the largest & oldest camellia we have here in the garden. It is a "Governor Mouton," and is estimated to be over 130 years old.

Lebanon Chapel

This is Mount Lebanon Chapel. It was built in 1835 by Dr. Thomas Henry Wright whose family owned the land at the time. Back in the early 1800's, depending on weather and road conditions, it could take hours to get into downtown Wilmington for church. Dr. Wright saw the need for a local church for the people who lived on the Sound.

The area that the chapel sits on never belonged to Sarah Jones. Dr. Wright deeded the church and six acres surrounding it to St. James Church of Wilmington in 1875. The Jones' daughter, Sadie, did get married in Mount

Lebanon Chapel in 1912. She married John Russell Pope, the architect who designed the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC.

The chapel still belongs to the St. James Church and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. Services are held here in the summer months, and events throughout the year. The chapel and its property are outside of Airlie's property line. Please respect their grounds.

Camellia Garden

At the start of what we call our Camellia Garden, is a cement structure that was believed to have been the rose garden trellis. Camellias add beautiful color to Airlie throughout the winter when they bloom. Most of the ones we have are Japanese camellias (*C. Japonica*) which despite its name is also found in Korea & Eastern China, as well as the *Sasanqua* Camellia. One would expect such a gorgeous flower to have a gorgeous scent, but Japanese camellias do not have a scent. Each hybrid of camellia has a different name, such as "Pink Perfection" or "Snow on the Mountain." Some of our camellias have not yet been identified. Camellias were very popular at the time the Joneses owned Airlie in the early 1900's. Many Camellias were destroyed by hurricane flooding in the past.

Beyond the rose trellis in the Camellia Garden is Camellia Knoll. It is a woodland garden, which helps shade the camellias from direct sunlight, which they do not tolerate well. Airlie Gardens' horticulture staff is hard at work preparing a restoration effort for the Camellia Garden. Restoration plans include a complete renovation of the garden to its 1920s appearance, when the garden peaked.

Spring Garden

This area is known as the Spring Garden. It was once a formal area adjacent to the Jones' mansion. The Spring Garden is the lowest lying area of Airlie and is prone to flooding, waters are said to at one time have reached the top of the head of the fountain statue during hurricanes. We are currently researching what actually existed in this area at the time the Joneses owned Airlie. Through the columns, the path leads to the last remaining vestiges of the mansion—a brick patio, which would have been in the backyard of the home. Beyond the fence, the white house on the knoll sits where the original mansion stood. The mansion itself no longer exists. After Sarah's death in 1943, her heirs sold the property to the Corbett family who lived in the old

house for 10 years and then dismantled the mansion in 1958 and built the house you see today. The Corbetts owned it up until New Hanover County bought the property in 1999. It is now owned by a private family and is used as a full-time residence.

The house that the Jones embellished here was absolutely gigantic! When Sarah Jones bought the property, the Seaside Park Hotel was situated here, and it was expanded for decades. By the time Sarah, died the house had 38 apartments, 12 bedrooms, and an indoor tennis court/ballroom.

Almost from the beginning of their marriage, Sarah and Pembroke Jones lived with their good friend Henry Walters, who was also a member of Wilmington's social elite. When Sarah was in her 60s, her husband died. Several years later she married Henry Walters, whose wealth was then added to hers. The parties thrown here at Airlie for members of Wilmington high society were beyond extravagant. Sarah herself once said that she spent \$300,000 a year entertaining, and that was in the early 1900's when \$300,000 would get you much farther than today. Their guests included the Vanderbilts and the Stuyvesant Fishes, and party favors included diamond rings and gold watches. They also would have had oyster roasts much as we do today.

Stables (dismantled in 2015)

The stables that were here during the Jones era were probably much more extensive. They were described as the finest in North Carolina in 1902. It has been estimated that the Joneses had 26 different carriages to choose from. In the early 1900's, one had to love, or at least pretend to love, horses in order to be socially accepted. In the 1980's the Corbett family owned horses and refurbished the stables for personal use. In 2015 those stables were dismantled due to structural damage, and will not be rebuilt due to their location within the flood zone. When they came down there was almost a foot of standing water underneath the floor. Our hope is to add plant material and develop this area as a scenic picnic spot in the future.

The backdrop around the stables, as well as many other areas of Airlie, have been used for filming many TV shows and movies. Some of these include Sandra Bullock's *28 Days*, Martin Lawrence's *Black Night*, as well as *Dawson's Creek*. Today the concrete structures that are left of the stables themselves are used to store horticultural equipment.

Bradley Creek Overlook

As we stand on the dike that created Airlie Lake, the fresh water world is on one side and the saltwater world is on the other. Just a few feet make a difference in what will grow in each environment. The body of water you see here is Bradley Creek. It is an estuary or an area where salt and fresh water mix. Bradley Creek is a tidal creek, meaning that the water level here in the salt marsh varies with the tides. Salt marshes play a very important role in estuarine ecosystems. The plants that grow here in the marsh are a very important food source to many fish and shellfish populations. The marsh also provides an area of protection from predators, wave and storm action, and other dangers. This makes for a great hatchery habitat for fishes. In fact, 90% of the commercial fish that we eat spend part of their life in an estuarine system like this.

The plants that live along the marsh have to be adapted to withstand salt spray, poor compacted soil, and full wind and sun exposure. Most of the grass that you see out in the marsh is *Spartina alterniflora*, or salt marsh cord grass. It is one of the only species of terrestrial plant that can stand being submerged in salt water for hours at a time. It is able to take saltwater in and then excrete the salt.

Along the edge of the creek we have planted a riparian buffer. A riparian buffer is a vegetative area used along waterways that will help to filter out pollutants and prevent sediment runoff. By using plants along the shoreline, runoff is slowed down and allowed to soak into the ground. The plants help to filter out the sediment to decrease the turbidity, or cloudiness, of the waterway. They help stabilize the bank against soil erosion.

Pollution has been a major problem in Bradley Creek. As you can see, there are tons of oysters here. We cannot harvest and eat these oysters, and have not been allowed to for over 60 years because of fecal coliform bacteria, which comes from animal waste. Picking up after your pets makes a big difference in water quality.

Airlie Gardens, in partnership with the North Carolina Coastal Federation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, have planted an oyster reef along 400 feet of Airlie's shoreline. At low tide the artificial reefs are visible and appear to be ordered in rectangular cells. These cells are made of other oyster shells that have been recycled once people have eaten the meat inside. Baby oysters, or spat, only attach to hard bottoms, and other oyster

shells are the preferred substrate. Establishing this reef will help to encourage new oyster growth, and although any oyster growth cannot be consumed, they will provide desirable ecological benefits to this watershed. A single mature oyster can filter 50 gallons of water a day and provide habitat and food for 300 different species of aquatic life. Airlie is now an oyster shell recycling facility (recycling barrels are located at the garden entrance), so please bring by your discarded shells because as of 2007 it is illegal to throw seashells into the landfill.

The tall palm trees you see growing here are called cabbage palmetto. The smaller palms at the base of these are scrub palm, needle palm, and windmill palm. Most of these plants are also adapted to living in a salt spray environment.

Bradley Creek Pier

With help from a CAMA grant and the proceeds from the 2005 Oyster Roast, Airlie was able to have this 270 foot pier constructed. This space is used as an outdoor classroom and provides a launch point using the floating dock to conduct kayak eco-tours with the public. Great birding opportunities are also made possible with the pier. If you are interested in participating in a kayak or birding program, please contact the Environmental Education staff or look online at www.airliegarden.org. Please notice the Preventing Polluted Runoff signage.

Closing

Thank you for touring Airlie Gardens. We hope you enjoyed learning about the history, horticulture, and ecology of this amazing place. We have many events and programs throughout the year, and we invite and encourage you to attend! From May-September we have our concert series on the first and third Fridays. In the fall comes our annual Oyster Roast and in winter we have Enchanted Airlie. The first Sunday of each month is free to New Hanover County residents.

We also would like to invite you to become a member of Airlie Gardens. Members enjoy year-round access to the gardens as well as our annual events. Please come often, as each season will bring new delights at Airlie.