

# Grace Episcopal Church

## Mt. Meigs, Alabama

*Text and photos by Dan Hardison*

Once part of rural Alabama historic Grace Episcopal Church in the community of Mt. Meigs is now facing the expanding suburbia of Montgomery. Barely noticeable from the road, this quaint country church harbours an unexpected secret – an elaborate garden.

Founded in the early 1800's, the small congregation was set to construct their first building when the Civil War began. Forced to postpone the construction and then faced with the financial hardships that followed the war, it would be 1893 before their building could be built. Using the original plans, designed thirty years earlier in the Gothic Revival style, the parishioners were finally able to open the doors to their own church.

Today Grace Church still retains the charm of the original country church with one important addition, a garden built on the Arts and Crafts ideals of reverence of nature, honesty of design, and respect for traditions of place. Designed and built by parish member Jim Scott and his wife Vivian, the gardens were constructed over a number of years beginning in 1975. “During a service one Sunday in spring, I looked out the open church window and thought how nice a little back garden would be,” recalled Scott. “I didn’t know, in that moment, that I had started on the garden making version of the Road to Damascus.”

Covering about an acre, the garden is laid out with bricked paths and walls to create a series of garden rooms. Among these rooms is the “Dining Room”, a walled area with teak table and chairs where Sunday school classes can be held, and the “Viking Tomb”, a small area with





chairs secluded by hedging to create a place of privacy. Windows on nature are created along intertwining paths by a bounty of trees. There is also an open lawn area where weddings can be held.

Following the concept of the Arts and Crafts garden, most of the plantings are naturally flowing creating a textural design. A separate 200-foot long cutting bed provides cut flowers for the altar and church functions.

The garden at Grace was designed for all to enjoy – from Sunday school classes to church meetings, weddings to funerals, quiet strolls for contemplation, and a gathering place for Easter sunrise service with all the local church community. Children have also been provided



space in this garden – in a grove of oak trees there is a large Victorian style treehouse. And behind the garden, are several acres of fields and woodland with walking paths that lead to forts and smaller treehouses.







There are fountains and pools with goldfish that young and old alike enjoy. But as Jim Scott admits, “Children love to take shortcuts through flowerbeds. Our own church kids are more or less trained, but occasionally one excited child will run across a bed in full bloom, and 10 children will follow in full chase. Accept it – its part of life.”

“While there’s never been any drawing of a master plan, these gardens have always confirmed to a master idea: that the church, the gardens, and the rituals of life should all be woven into one fabric,” explains Scott. “We see a church garden as a place where birth, childhood, courtship, marriage, spiritual maturity, and death can all be intertwined, enhanced, and perhaps better borne and understood.”

As suburban life encroaches on this small country church, its members can take heart that there is a place of quiet and beauty where one can

still enjoy a harmony with nature. And as Jim Scott points out, “Any gardener will tell you that the thrill of gardening is multiplied by the amount of enjoyment the garden gives others. I challenge anyone to duplicate the pleasure and value of church gardening.” ☩

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