

GROUNDS OF "IMPROVEMENT" *The Belmont Mansion Garden*

BY JUDY BULLINGTON

On a warm August night in 1884, Adelia Hayes Franklin Acklen Cheatham (known to history as Adelia Acklen) sat down to compose a letter to her son William Acklen who was traveling to New York. She wrote, "We all took a stroll in the grounds this evening," and indicated her son was especially missed during these walks.¹ Since the fifteenth century, the term "grounds" described an enclosed, or otherwise set apart, portion of land marking it as a special place. Grounds and garden, terminology used interchangeably in nineteenth-century correspondence, denoted a literal and figurative cultivation of space within the broader landscape whether situated in a bustling urban or pastoral country setting. Artificially shaped and ornamented grounds served as a private setting for leisure activities—such as the Acklen family stroll—and instructing young people about the natural world while providing a framework of cultivated nature within which public viewers could reflect upon the refined architectural aspects of the residence itself. Gardens were also sites for experimenting with

exotic plants, innovative grafting practices, and improvements associated with the horticultural arts. Therefore, gardens functioned as the collective embodiment of a scientific mind, cultural knowledge, and socio-economic status. But they were also uniquely suited to expressions of individuality and taste. Few things could speak to the virtue of one's character better than a well-appointed garden.

Landscaped estates were built on the foundations of wealth, culture, and refinement; all of which Adelia and her second husband Colonel Joseph Alexander Smith Acklen possessed in abundance. The newlyweds attended to the design of the gardens as an integral part of the building of their Italian-style villa from the initial phase of construction between 1849–1853. Adelia continued to manage the gardens, including post-war renovations, following Joseph's untimely death from fever in the fall of 1863 until the estate was sold in 1887. Belmont was built on a tract of land purchased by Acklen prior to her marriage to Joseph Acklen in 1849, creating a summer home with grounds that were meant to be distinctive from working plantations



The ornamented grounds of Belmont cascaded down from the mansion in three large circular designs toward a 105-foot-tall decorative water tower. (Photo from water tower, ca. 1870, Belmont Mansion Association)

like Angola, the Adelia Acklen's cotton-producing estate in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. Belmont was, in many respects, a place near family and friends where the Acklens could retreat from the demands of a planter lifestyle, which provided the economic means of building a country estate while simultaneously serving as an emblematic statement of the prominent social standing of its residents. The "situation" of Belle Monte (Italian for beautiful mountain) was particularly ideal in terms

of the splendid vistas it afforded from atop one of the highest hills near Nashville. The grounds in front of the mansion, facing away from the downtown view, were laid out in three large circular designs that cascaded south down the slope toward a 105-foot water tower and nearby greenhouse.

The Acklens' garden was created during a pivotal period in early American garden history. Andrew Jackson Downing's publications—notably his popular 1841 first edition of "A Treatise on the Theory