



Exotic plants filled the 200-foot-long greenhouse, including banana, orange, and Indian rubber trees along with oriental palms. (Belmont Mansion Association)

internationally. The blooms measured a full foot in diameter but the leaves of the waterlily itself spanned nearly four feet; large enough for Paxton's young daughter to be photographed standing on this enormous floating pad. While the small scale of the fountain's basin referenced by William Acklen would not have allowed a Victoria Regia to reach the impressive mature scale

of its English counterparts, it is possible the pool he mentions was located elsewhere on the grounds. An excerpt from the diary of John Hill Fergusson who served in the Tenth Illinois Infantry during the Civil War described "a large free stone basin about 12 feet wide and 4 or 5 feet deep" through which water was circulated by means of pipes connected to a reservoir.²⁷

Fergusson remarked upon the fish in the basin, but it is feasible that the Victoria Regia was introduced into this, or a similar, stone pool at a later date.

Roses, on the other hand, were a more common feature of period gardens. We know from Sarah York Jackson's letter written in April of 1852 that the Hermitage gardens had "about fifty varieties of roses, some very fine."²⁸ William Acklen recalls roses at Belmont as well: "In the third circle, which was entered from the four sides through rose-covered arches, was a rose labyrinth (a miniature copy on a small scale of the one at Hampton Court), a mass of roses of all colors and varieties in an intricacy of walks."²⁹

Adelicia Acklen would have been familiar with the gardens at Belair, home of the Julia Margaret Lytle Nichol, mentioned in her August 31, 1884, letter to William as having visited Belmont earlier in the day. Nichol's husband, William Nichol, mayor of Nashville 1835–1837, brought Daniel McIntyre from Scotland to take care of the garden, greenhouse, and imported plants at Belair where circular plots of lilies and triangular beds of buttercups, hyacinths, and narcissi were bordered by an assortment of annuals. Here, too, visitors could wander through the grounds on white shell-covered pathways. Exquisite rose beds were focal points of both gardens. Rose oil and rosewater had, since Roman times, been used for medicinal remedies and cooking as well as aromatic fragrances and beauty products. Julia Nichol used petals gathered

from the garden to make rosewater that she bottled and gifted to guests including, one may presume, Acklen.

Greenhouse technology was essential to sustaining the estate and supporting the propagation of tropical plants. A two hundred-foot greenhouse was filled with a variety of exotics which included banana trees, Indian rubber tree, oriental palms, and orange trees. The anonymous author of the *Debow's Review* article commented that "the green-house will almost compare with that of the government at Washington."³⁰ William Acklen described the cluster of structures near the water tower and noted a few of the species they housed:

The conservatory marking the lower end of the garden comprised three huge glass houses with the propagating house in the rear. In the central glass house were tropical flowers and fruits. Winter grapes supplied the family table. The west hothouse was given over to a rare collection of Camelia Japonica, some of the plants being of great age. The conservatory contained jasmines of many varieties and lilies and a fine collection of cacti.³¹

In *The Gardener's Monthly* article of January 1868 on "Horticulture in Tennessee," Fred J. French wrote, "The conservatory, built of iron, is truly a Crystal Palace, with its high dome and spacious wings. Each department is filled with costly exotics, rare and beautiful."³² French