

although it was their labor that powered the plantation system. This was "a powerful tactic that artists used to suggest a planter's undisputed command over his estate."³⁷ The same tactic, it would appear, was used to depict country seats as well as working plantations. Instead of breaking with established conventions, the artist visually articulates the operative social hierarchy that existed within planter culture and establishes ownership of property.

Although Joseph Acklen signed a prenuptial agreement, he industriously set about managing and increasing Adelia Acklen's vast holdings and became a recognized authority on effective plantation management. The decade prior to the Civil War was a very prosperous one for the Acklens, and the value of their estate increased to three million dollars. This portrait of the estate grounds not only signified their prosperity, it was an emblematic construction of Acklen's perceived skills in plantation management. A correspondent for the magazine *Southern Cultivator* wrote in 1852:

Col. Acklen is one of the largest planters on the Mississippi River and has the finest and best managed one in the South... He employs six overseers, a general agent and bookkeeper, two physicians, a head carpenter, a tinner, ditcher, and a preacher for his negroes. The houses on each plantation are neat frame houses, on brick pillars, and are furnished with good

bedding, mosquito bars, and all that is essential to health and comfort. The Negroes are well fed and clothed, and seem to be the happiest population I have ever seen. Everything moves on systematically, and with the discipline of a regular trained army. Each plantation has a hospital for the sick, well furnished; a nurse house and a general cook house.... Col. Acklen takes great interest in planting; has a fine agricultural library, and regardless of expense, keeps up with all the modern improvements in farming.³⁸

The Belmont estate portrait presents gardening as a form of the overall landscape improvements the Acklens pursued through agrarian practices. The villa sits upon the crown of a hill surrounded by manicured gardens, an accouterment of ornamental objects, and an assortment of outside structures that extend and support the functionality of the 19,000 square foot main house. Although considered to be in the country at the time of its construction, Belmont afforded an excellent view of the city and river from one of the seven highest elevations in Nashville. It also had the distinct advantage of being a good distance from the swampy bottomlands that harbored mosquitoes and the threat of yellow fever.³⁹ The layout of the grounds, as noted previously, loosely adhered to some principles espoused by Andrew Jackson Downing, the father of American landscape architecture, who recommended cluster-

ing the more formal elements closer to the house and gradually transitioning toward a more natural arrangement. The formal garden elements are visible in the painting as a circular area rendered in a lighter color palette, which seems to pivot around an invisible axis represented by the villa. Elm trees, identified as *ulmus Americana*, bracket and control the view in a manner consistent with the picturesque landscape traditions popularized in England by Reverend William Gilpin during the eighteenth century before being adapted to American landscape design by Downing, among others.⁴⁰ Two figures, perhaps children at play, and a horse-drawn buggy provide additional picturesque motifs. The overall effect is that of pastoral serenity, drawing attention to how people who lived on, and visited this estate, were meant to experience its tranquility. Visitors who meandered along garden paths encountered edifying experiences that ultimately shaped and refined aesthetic tastes modeled on those of the privileged class who were the patrons of these constructed spaces. The fact that the Acklens were somewhat intentional about these aims is supported by their practice of opening the grounds to the public every day of the week except Sunday because Nashville lacked any public gardens at that time. This offers a tantalizing clue about how gardens, in Theresa O'Malley's view, "operated as a social stage upon which differences in class, status, and race—landowner, educated servant, and slave—were enacted and reinforced."⁴¹

In conclusion, gardens like those adjacent to the Belmont Mansion were artificially shaped and ornamented as a leisure space for private experience, emerging as a physiological field where bodies, material things, and well-ordered nature intersected.⁴² Although paintings and other primary source images are meager documents of the actual experience of a garden environment, they function as a kind of glyphic guide to the idea of engaging nature in an "improved" form, a notion underscored by the written accounts of those who had access to the authentic grounds. Gardens, whether painted or planted, were uniquely suited to expressions of individuality and taste as well as embodying broader ideals of the time. In 1789, a noted clergyman and geographer, Jedidiah Morse, wrote of one country seat, "Its fine situation... the arrangement and variety of forest-trees—the gardens—the artificial fish-ponds... discover a refined and judicious taste. Ornament and utility are happily united."⁴³ The same could be said of Adelia Acklen's gardens, which were created more than half a century later in antebellum America. The grounds of Belmont were indeed "a fine situation," where observers discovered a refined and tasteful display of cultivated nature that united ornament and utility.

1. Letter dated 10:00 PM, August 31, 1884. Ackland Papers. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.