

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media contact: Kathleen Butler, kbutler@dehistory.org, (302) 295-2383

NEW CASTLE, Del., August 5, 2022 — The George Read II House & Gardens, a National Historic Landmark owned and operated by the Delaware Historical Society, has announced a transformative campaign to revivify its grounds, creating a socially, environmentally, and financially sustainable landscape for the next generation. Planning will encompass the entire 2.5 acres of grounds surrounding the 1804 Read House, which is situated within the town’s historic core with substantial Delaware River frontage. Ultimately, the project will reconcile the gardens’ multi-layered history with Old New Castle’s legacy of beautiful design, while centering the Society’s contemporary mission to “educate, inspire, and empower people and communities.”

The Society is pleased to partner with DAVID RUBIN Land Collective of Philadelphia and Indianapolis to develop a design concept rooted in community dialogue. The firm’s recent work includes the master plan for Newfields, a 300-acre cultural campus uniting the Indianapolis Museum of Art with the former Josiah Lilly estate and other neighboring assets; the renovation of Franklin Park and the National World War I Memorial at Pershing Square in Washington, D.C.; and a landscape concept for the Visitor Center of Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library. David A. Rubin, its founding principal, is the 2011–12 recipient of the Rome Prize in Landscape Architecture. Mr. Rubin is joined on the Read House project by his colleagues Mandi Fung, David Elliot, and Sydney Conaway.

A design phase of six to eight months will begin on August 11 with a 6:30 p.m. public meeting at the Read House & Gardens, 42 The Strand, New Castle. Interested participants should register at readhouseandgardens.org/landscape. A dynamic Web platform containing information about the project, opportunities for remote participation, and realtime synthesis of other stakeholders’ input will be launched following this initial meeting. Subsequent in-person meetings will be announced.

“The energy behind this partnership is that, like the Read House & Gardens, Land Collective’s practice is centered on the principle of empathy,” said Brenton Grom, Director of the George Read II House & Gardens. “The Read House invites people to bring their multiple intelligences to its spaces, often first to appreciate their beauty but then also to notice things about their design, materials, craftsmanship, and environment. Through their senses and critical reasoning, they start to empathize with the complicated human dynamics that shaped—and were shaped by—these physical spaces over generations, and many leave saying that they now see things in a new way. Likewise, Land Collective thinks about the emotive qualities of their landscape designs, and how those qualities can leave people transformed.” Land Collective’s design mission culminates in “the desire to create a place in which very different people might come together.”

DHS Executive Director Dr. David W. Young noted that “this garden planning project for the Read House will generate broad community involvement to craft a vision for the Read House that is historical, beautiful, and sustainable for generations to enjoy the Gem of Old New Castle.”

The project aims to celebrate and learn from Old New Castle’s local residents, who maintain a remarkable tradition of researching and curating the town’s storied streetscapes. Robert R. Davis, Chair of the Read House & Gardens Advisory Council and a longtime resident of New Castle, praised the current staff for “making the Read House a part of the neighborhood, from opening the garden gates outside of business hours to creating open communication channels with neighbors. Many of us with longstanding interest in the Read House have been inspired to step up our engagement as the Delaware Historical Society deepens its commitment to leveraging the Read House & Gardens campus for social good.”

The project also aims to invite new stakeholders by inviting forgotten voices and identities back into the dialogue, such as those of the Lenape ancestors whose traditions still survive today. Similarly, there is much to learn by considering the women and longtime African American gardener at the end of the nineteenth century who were the central players in shaping the Gardens' evolution and transmitting information about their design history.

As summarized by Ivan Henderson, VP of Programming and Director of the Jane and Littleton Mitchell Center for African American Heritage at DHS, "the choice of Land Collective as our partner in planning landscape design will allow us to share in the exploration and crafting of ideas to positively transform the physical and ideological accessibility of this historic property, driven by a process that privileges the diverse needs of people—neighbors and visitors to the site—as well as the environmental and social sustainability focus of our preservation mission."

About the Read House & Gardens

The Read House & Gardens site is situated in Lenapehoking, homeland of the Lenape people for tens of thousands of years. Since the 1990s, teams of archaeologists led by Dr. Lu Ann De Cunzo of the University of Delaware have unearthed more than 70,000 objects that reveal a complicated past, including conquest by the Swedish, Dutch, and British empires during the seventeenth century. The present parterre section of the garden was once occupied by the home of George Read I, signer of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution and an early governor, senator, and chief justice of Delaware. From 1766 until his death in 1798, Read joined a century of prior inhabitants in continually improving the house and yard.

As Dr. Emily T. Cooperman confirms in a recent report on the Read House cultural landscape, it cannot easily be defined by one single period of significance. George Read II (1765–1836), longtime U.S. Attorney for the District of Delaware, erected the present Read House next door to his father's between 1797 and 1804, but landscaping of the grounds remained incomplete during his lifetime. The garden plan that exists today dates generally to 1847–48, when William Couper, a New Castle native who amassed a fortune in the East Asian trade, returned to purchase the property from the Read family. Robert Buist, a prominent Scottish nurseryman in Philadelphia, is understood to have been the designer.

Yet the gardens continued to evolve during the Couper years and again the 1920s, after the Read House was acquired by Philip D. and Lydia Chichester Laird. The Lairds, both cousins of the extensive du Pont family, were inspired by the Colonial Revival movement in transforming the historic house and grounds into a social hub. Hardscape and plantings were altered, the back kitchen garden was replaced with a swimming pool and poolhouse, and a yacht basin was installed at the riverfront. The Lairds went on to lead the efforts to transform New Castle from a declining town into a noted destination for preservation tourism. The Read House, its gardens, and the rest of the town appeared in dozens of mainstream lifestyle publications, such as *House & Gardens* and *Town & Country*, during their tenure.

DHS assumed ownership of the property upon Lydia Laird's death in 1975 and has operated it as a museum since then, undertaking a comprehensive restoration of the house in the early 1980s and a garden restoration in the 1990s and early 2000s. As is inevitable in such projects, the Society made choices as to which existing elements it would preserve and which evidence it would rely on to recreate past elements—eliminating, for instance, the Laird-era swimming pool but retaining their brick hardscape and reintroducing plantings from the 1880s.

DHS and Land Collective have embraced this complexity. In the spirit of past generations, this fresh project offers an opportunity to balance preservation with contemporary needs. With community input, the result is expected to deepen the historical meaning of the Read House & Gardens site for present and future visitors, neighbors, and admirers.