MIDDLEGATE JAPANESE GARDENS
Japan on the Gulf of Mexico

by Anne Legett

Fig. 1. Rudolf Hecht, Middlegate Japanese Garden (courtesy of Harry Stegenga, grandson of John Dambrink, Pass Christian, MS)

REMEMBERING A GARDEN

Once there were the most enchanting gardens in Pass Christian on the Mississippi Gulf Coast about 70-miles east of New Orleans, Louisiana. Middlegate Japanese Gardens were almost a secret, not visible to the street, and many residents were not even aware of the gardens' existence. Rudolf Hecht, wealthy New Orleans entrepreneur, and his wife, Lynne Watkins Hecht, created the gardens at their beach "cottage" to preserve fond memories of their travels in Japan.[1]

My interest in the story of Middlegate Japanese Gardens has been life long. At the age of 12, I first passed through the bamboo gate at the St. Louis Street entrance and walked under the blue tile roof leading into the garden. Like Alice stepping through the looking glass, I passed from the small Gulf Coast town of Pass Christian in the 1950s into a Japanese dreamscape unlike anything I had ever imagined. With the property facing the beach road of Pass Christian (US Highway 90), I could still hear automobile traffic and smell the sea breeze. Though seagulls called above, all that was familiar in my world melted away. I had not traveled. The center of my universe was the Mississippi Gulf Coast and my journeys were limited to the Louisiana and Mississippi waters of the Gulf of Mexico. My tour of Middlegate, though but a few miles from my home, was my first visit to a foreign place.

1. Dorothy "Dottee" Hecht Cooper, interview, July 29, 1999.

If my travel experience was limited, then my understanding of Japanese culture was even more so. My small knowledge of Japanese people came from a neighborhood grocer who related painful accounts of his years as a prisoner in a Japanese POW camp. This opinion, combined with an awareness of my uncle's experience of the war with Japan, created in me an image of Japan as a country both brutal and uncivilized. As I walked through this serene and beautiful garden, with its fantastic statues and wonderful Asian artifacts, I experienced conflicted emotions.

The woman escorting my Girl Scout troop was not only my troop leader but also my catechism teacher. In the era of pre-Vatican II conservatism, for wary Catholics, any activity that might put one in the "proximity of evil," such as attending a Protestant wedding without a priest's permission, jeopardized one's immortal soul. There I stood, a devoted Catholic child, in an apparently sacred space, but one including strange, foreign statues that looked very much like "false gods." While I was awestruck by my surroundings, I wondered if the adults I had invested with the trust of childhood had led me into an "occasion of sin."

Nostalgia for that experience at Middlegate drew me to review the circumstances that culminated in the creation of such a grand and marvelously strange place in the otherwise European-styled landscape of the American South. It also led me to investigate how nature secured the demise of landscape that delighted and amazed visitors to a southern resort for decades. Middlegate Japanese Gardens were an example of the landscape architecture that was typical during the so-called "Country Place Era" (c. 1890 - 1930) when the Mississippi Gulf Coast was a major resort. Labor was cheap and plentiful. The New South was emerging but civil rights and equal rights were yet to come. Modern technology and scientific achievements dramatically changed everyone's lives. The United States and Japan both sought respect and struggled to become industrial and military powers.

THE CREATION OF MIDDLEGATE

Middlegate Japanese Gardens were developed when "Oriental gardens" were emerging as a popular motif among American gardening styles.[2] Demand for Japanese architecture, decorative arts, and gardens grew following Japan's impressive exhibits at international expositions at Philadelphia (1876), Chicago (1893), New Orleans (1884 - 1885), San Francisco (1894, 1915), St. Louis (1904), and San Diego (1915).

Pass Christian was a popular coastal resort and a vacation community. The wealthy élites of New Orleans as well as the surrounding sugar and cotton growers maintained second homes along the Gulf Coast and, among these impressive properties, Middlegate Japanese Gardens were an exceptional example of the finery created in the coastal resort lifestyle. Like other gardens of this era and place, Middlegate owed its existence to people of wealth and imagination.

Rudolf S. Hecht and Lynne Watkins married June 3, 1911 at Trinity Episcopal Church in Pass Christian. The Hechts lived in New Orleans in the University Section in Audubon Place, "the city's second residential park and the most outstanding."[3] Rudolf Hecht (1885-1956) was born in Ansbach, Germany and moved to the United States in 1903 to study banking. After working in Chicago, Hecht accepted a job with Hibernia Bank and Trust in New Orleans, and in 1918, at the age of 33, he was named president.[4]

2. Southern estate gardens are discussed in Mac Griswold, Eleanor Weller, The Golden Age of American Gardens (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1991), 226-236.

3. Robert J. Cangelosis, Jr. and Dorothy G. Schlesinger, ed., New Orleans Architecture, VIII: The University Section (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 1997), 72.

4. For biographical information on the Hecht and Watkins families, see Anne Legett, "Middlegate Japanese Gardens: Preservation, Private Property, Public Memory;" Masters thesis, Louisiana State University School of Landscape Architecture, 2004, 55-75.

Hecht's primary interest, however, was in world trade. In 1919 he helped form the Mississippi Shipping Company to spur trade between South America and the Louisiana Gulf Coast. Hecht worked to expand the New Orleans Port facilities, traveled extensively promoting international commerce, and was a founder of the New Orleans International Trade Mart in 1945. The New Orleans *Times Picayune* noted that "Hecht was personally entertained by the heads of governments . . . and he in turn entertained many distinguished guests both here and at his summer home in Pass Christian."[5]

In contrast with her international husband, Mrs. Hecht (1887-1961) had a strong historical connection with New Orleans and Pass Christian. Lynne Watkins' father, Linn Boyd Watkins, was a Louisiana Supreme Court Justice who also fought in the Civil War. The Watkins family's history in Pass Christian included owning Lynne Castle, "one of the most aristocratic hotels on the coast."[6]

The couple's main property in Pass Christian had three houses, known as Eastgate, Middlegate, and Westgate, fronting on West Beach Drive (Highway 90). Estella Paxton Watkins, Lynne Hecht's mother, first imagined building a Japanese garden there, and it was Watkins' 1911 cottage that became the main residence of Middlegate Japanese Gardens. Watkins lived in New Orleans from 1877-1887, when Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) was writing for the local newspapers at the time of the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition held in the Crescent City in 1885. She may well have seen the Japanese exhibit that made Hearn decide that he wanted to live in Japan. Hearn's article, "In a Japanese Garden" for *Atlantic Monthly* in 1892, may also have caught her attention.[7]

It was Lynne Watkins Hecht, however, who turned her mother's dream into Middlegate Japanese Gardens. When asked why her parents had chosen to build the Japanese gardens in Pass Christian, Dorothy "Dottee" Cooper, the Hecht's daughter, explained that her parents traveled all over the world and Japan was one of their favorite places. Cooper maintained that the idea for the Japanese garden was her grandmother's, but the design was her mother's. Each time her parents visited Japan, they brought back things for the garden.[8] They also relied heavily on Dr. Ōdate Gyōju (b. 1890), the interpreter on their 1924 trip and a scholar of financial history, who acted as their purchasing agent.[9]

Lynne Watkins Hecht graduated from Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans with a degree in Art. At Newcomb, she made pottery, enjoyed hunting wildflowers with friends and creating botanical drawings. Lynne Watkins Hecht was an artist who fell in love with Japanese art and Japanese gardens, and went on to design and create Middlegate Japanese Gardens.[10]

Working with New Orleans architect and personal friend, Rathbone DeBuys, the Hechts transformed their vision into reality. DeBuys, accustomed to working with New Orleans' élite in building homes in the University Section,[11] turned the Hechts' ideas and sketches into blueprints for the garden houses and features. Construction took place in the 1920s, when the livelihood of many residents rose and fell with the fortunes of wealthy families building large homes on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The photo of Rudolf Hecht standing on one of Middlegate Japanese Gardens' bridges (Fig. 1) exhibits the skill of local craftsmen working with local materials. Although garden ornaments were collected during

5. Times Picayune, January 19, 1956, p.1.

6. "Lynne Castle Destroyed by Fire Entailing Estimated Loss of $70,000," Gulfport, Mississippi, Daily Herald, March 22, 1915. p.1.

7. Lafcadio Hearn, "In a Japanese Garden," Atlantic Monthly LXX, No. 417 (July 1892) 14-31. She also may have known the essay through Hearn's book, Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan (1894).

8. Cooper interview. Dorothy "Dottee" Cooper, daughter of Lynne Watkins Hecht, interview, July 29, 1999.

9. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), Attachment D, Dr. Gyoju Odate, Tokyo.

10. Maud Costain. "Japan on the Gulf of Mexico," Country Life, March 1935. This essay borrows the title of that article, the first to introduce the Hecht garden to a national audience.

the Hechts' travels in Japan or through a buyer, they did not import labor and construction materials from Japan.[12]

A TOUR OF THE GARDENS

Lynne Watkins Hecht lived in New Orleans, a culturally diverse city with a strong gardening tradition. It was likely from this perspective that she designed Middlegate Japanese Gardens. In 1927, when the gardens were near completion, architect DeBuys returned several items to the Hechts, including a "book entitled, The Flowers and Gardens of Japan, and a box containing a toy Japanese house."[13] The Hechts, informed by their travels in Japan and popular literature, imported Japanese garden art to their estate. Using photos and documents in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Gardens, Maud Costain's 1935 article in *Country Life*, and my own recollections, let's tour Middlegate as a visitor might have in the mid-twentieth century.

Fig. 2. Tea House. Photo from Rathbone DeBuys, Architectural Work Designed and Supervised by Rathbone DeBuys, *(New Orleans: c. 1950) (courtesy of New Orleans Public Library)*

According to the Du Cane sisters' influential book, *The Flowers and Gardens of Japan*, even "The humblest garden must have two entrances . . . the principal entrance, by which guests enter, and the back entrance. . . "[14] used by the gardeners. At Middlegate, guests approached via St. Louis (Second) Street "through a graceful gate built of heavy bamboo with a roof of brilliant blue tiles, and wooden side panels in which are cut Oriental hieroglyphics which spell the name 'Middlegate.'"[15] This entrance followed the Du Canes' observation that "Roofed gateways with inscriptions are typical in Japanese gardens."[16] Just inside the gate stood a pair of large, porcelain Fu dogs, "protecting" the tranquility of the gardens.

To further transport visitors beyond the Gulf Coast, a bright red lacquered torii gate spanned the entry path. Moving past hedges of azaleas, visitors gained a commanding view of an impressive stone *yukimi,* or "snow viewing," lantern, over five feet in diameter. Nearby was a twelve-foot stone Kasuga lantern with an inscription indicating that it was "a gift to Baron Hisakata Shimazu, a Japanese feudal lord, from the Emperor of Japan (Komei). It bears the court of arms of the Royal

11. Rathbone DeBuys, Architectural Work Designed and Supervised by Rathbone DeBuys, 1934. Rathbone DeBuys Papers. Orleans Parish Public Library, New Orleans, Louisiana.

12. Danny Taylor, AIA, Koch and Wilson Architects, New Orleans, Louisiana, Telephone Interview, November 2, 2002.

13. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), Rathbone DeBuys letter, June 29, 1927.

14. Ella Du Cane, The Flowers and Gardens of Japan (London: Adams and Charles Black, 1908), 34.

15. Maud Costain. "Japan on the Gulf of Mexico," p. 20. The characters read nakamon, literally, "middle gate."

16. Du Cane, The Flowers and Gardens of Japan, 35

Household, namely the flower of chrysanthemum with sixteen petals."[17] Ahead was a grand fountain in a wide, spacious pond crossed by a bridge. In front of the bridge stood a wishing well, a familiar feature in American Japanese gardens of the era. At the end of the pond was a twelve-foot stone pagoda.[18]

Middlegate featured Japanese plants including azaleas, flowering cherries, wisteria, camellia japonica, and giant bamboo, as well as familiar natives including white and yellow jasmine and pecan trees. However, the Hechts understood that a Japanese garden "is not a flower garden, but a true landscape garden, a miniature representation of the scenery found in the (Japanese) country."[19] Thus, at Middlegate, water, plants, rocks, and earthen mounds were used to suggest mountains, lakes, and streams. Diverging stepping stone paths led to different vistas, and along them were placed statues, lanterns and other garden ornaments.

Fig. 3. Images from the brochure, Middlegate Japanese Gardens, *p. 2 (courtesy of Pass Christian Garden Club)*

Bronze and stone lanterns were everywhere. These referred distantly to the custom of donating lanterns to Buddhist temples and shrines, and more directly to the vogue for massive lanterns in late-nineteenth century gardens. They also signaled the Hechts' love of collecting garden ornaments and the acumen of their buyer, Dr. Odate, who explained his method in one letter:

> *The purchase of stone lanterns is not so easy one . . . I selected 10 feet [sic] stone lantern which is about the tallest stone lantern in Japan. In order to harmonize the rest of the stone lanterns with the above mentioned 10 feet one, I selected a pagoda of 12 feet in height, and the umbrella like (snow seeing type) stone lanterns of the following sizes: the first one with 4 1/2 feet in the diameter of the top cover, second one with 4 feet, and the third one with 3 1/2 feet in diameter.*[20]

Some of the garden lanterns at Middlegate were neither antique nor Japanese in manufacture. In a letter referencing an order to duplicate "Lanterns for a Japanese Garden," the architect DeBuys specified that the lanterns "be constructed of California Red Wood glazed with ground glass, as exact duplicates of the sample now in your possession."[21] All of the lanterns were electrified, beautifully illuminating the garden at night.[22]

17. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), Odate letter, December 30, 1925. Emperor Komei (1831-1867) worked with the powerful Shimazu clan for what would become the Meiji Restoration, and the gift of the lantern to Hisakata (aka Hisanari [1842-1890]) shows this connection.

18. Ibid.

19. Du Cane, The Flowers and Gardens of Japan, 44.

20. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), Odate letter, November 6, 1925.

21. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), Rathbone Debuys letter, June 11, 1927.

22. Cooper interview.

From the garden's central area, visitors followed "Lovers Lane, a winding tunnel of over-arching bamboo"[23] to the tile-roofed, Japanese-style Guest House, where guests removed their shoes (Fig. 3). The Guest House opened on to a sunken garden, from where steps, flanked by bronze lions, connected to a lawn. At its far end, an elegant fountain was fashioned from a massive bronze vase of the kind often imported from Japan in the late-nineteenth century. The sunken garden provided a perfect setting for luncheons, dances, receptions, and even weddings, though family and friends have also been married near the round pond, by the pool, on the Wishing Bridge (Fig. 3), and on the porch of the Tea House above the waterfall (Fig. 2, previous page). Doree Cooper recalls, "growing up in the Japanese garden was sort of like growing up on a movie set, when we were little children and my grandmother had parties and we wore little kimonos with paper chrysanthemums in our hair."[24]

The Du Cane sisters' book explains that early Japanese gardens "usually contained a large irregular lake, with at least one island reached by a bridge of picturesque form."[25] At Middlegate, the swimming pool appeared like a small lake with two islands and a bridge spanning across.

From the sunken garden, visitors could see the blue tiled roof of the Tea House located on a sharp hill featuring a waterfall that emerged from under the structure. The porch in front of the Tea House directly overlooked the waterfall, which was fed by an artesian well and constructed out of rock so as to fall in steps. The cataract filled the lagoon-like swimming pool. It also fed the stream, crossed by several low bridges of stone, wood, and bamboo that flowed through the entire garden before ending in a drain. Near the pool, sculptures of cranes stood by the tile-roofed Bath House.

In this area, in her last years, Lynne Hecht created a meditation garden in a small space between the Bath House and the path to the Tea House. According to her granddaughter, "It had gravel on the ground, stepping stones, and a little sculpture that looked like a well. There were ceramic garden stools and it was enclosed by wood gates with thatched looking grass."[26] Although the main residence was screened by trees and shrubs and not readily visible from the pool area, a walkway continued to the house, which was bordered on the garden side by a long wisteria arbor. Two more large bronze lanterns marked another entry into the garden. If guests followed the stream, they soon arrived at another tea house. Tucked into the foliage along the path leading to it were granite statues. Among them were the Seven Gods of Good Fortune, including the "God of Integrity" (Ebisu), the "God of Wealth" (Daikoku) standing on his moneybags, and the "Goddess of Charm" (Benzaiten) with her *biwa* (lute).[27] Both tea houses were constructed of wood, embellished with carvings and gold leaf, and crowned with ornate blue tiled roofs with decorative end caps, in keeping with the Japanese style of the garden. Costain describes the interiors as "purely Japanese," with tatami mats and Japanese furnishings. In later years, sparsely furnished, the tea houses provided cool sleeping places. Located on hills, they caught evening breezes.[28]

By following the stream, visitors came to the garden's Pine Gate entrance and, past a hill, to the red, semicircular Wishing Bridge, known more commonly as a Drum Bridge or Moon Bridge because, as the Du Cane sisters explained of the type, it is "supposed to suggest a full moon, as the [reflected image in the] water below completes the circle."[29] In the lore propagated at Middlegate, and reported by Costain and Cooper, if one ascended then descended the

23. Costain, "Japan on the Gulf of Mexico," p. 22.

24. Cooper interview.

25. Du Cane, The Flowers and Gardens of Japan, 8.

26. Cooper interview.

27. Costain, "Japan on the Gulf of Mexico," 25, 65.

28. Cooper interview.

29. Du Cane, The Flowers and Gardens of Japan, 32.

steeply arched bridge backwards, with eyes closed and in silence, then any wish imagined during the perilous journey would come true.[30]

Among Middlegate's myriad statues, the most significant—both for the garden and the history of Tokugawa period (1602-1868) Buddhist sculpture in America—was the great bronze Buddha (Fig. 4), or, more accurately, Kannon (Ch. Guanyin, Sk. Avalokitesvara). In May of 1930, the granite terraces and the reflecting pool were under construction in preparation for the arrival of a massive work.[31] The statue arrived at the Port of New Orleans and cleared Customs in June,[32] after being shipped from Yokohama in February. According to the formal notation, the statue was:

Fig. 4. Bronze Kannon, 1735 (courtesy of Pass Christian Garden Club)

> *One old Bronze Buddha (Kannon) Statue with Pedestal*
>
> *The statue proper, eight feet in height; the pedestal, four-feet in height.*
>
> *Name of Producer: Takumi Obata*
>
> *Date of Production: 1735 A.D. (20th year of Kyoho in Japanese calendar)*
>
> *Acquired from Kotokuin, Kamakura by K. Imaizumi, antique dealer, Tokyo; Sold to Dr. Gyoju Odate, January 6, 1930.*
>
> *Translation of Japanese characters on the back of Buddha: "Sculptor, cast maker: Obata Takumi, Ten Thousand people's contribution, Edo, Musashi Province"*[33]

The Buddhist icon was enshrined in a secluded area at Middlegate, reached by granite steps that led to the first octagonal terrace where there was a reflecting pool crossed by two bridges. More steps approached the second terrace where the Daibutsu, or Great Buddha, sat on a lotus base, protected by two larger than life bronze Niō, the typical Buddhist guardians, known affectionately by the Hecht family as "Lightning" and "Thunder" because one, known formally as Agyō, held a vajra, or diamond club, that looked

30. Cooper interview; Costain, "Japan on the Gulf of Mexico," 25.

31. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), Debuys letter, May 10, 1930.

32. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), George W.M. Ruff, Inc., Customhouse Brokers letter, June 12, 1930.

33. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), K. Yanagita, "Choice Selection of Japanese Art, Hachishi-cho, Nikko, February 1, 1930." Yanagita may well be the noted ethnographer Yanagita Kunio (1875 -1962). For a discussion of Buddhist sculpture in the Edo period, the subscription campaigns used to finance the casting of large bronze statues, the sale of statues by temples after the Buddhist persecution of 1871, and the import of such works to America, see Patricia Graham, Faith and Power in Japanese Buddhist Art, 1600-2005 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

like a lightning rod to the children.[34] Middlegate Japanese Gardens, in an undated brochure, informed visitors that the massive bronze statue came from the gardens of the great Daibutsu in Kamakura, one of Japan's best-known tourist sites.

Rudolf Hecht had first seen this Buddha when he visited Kamakura in 1924 with his wife.[35] In *Around the Face of the Globe*, Hecht describes his return in 1952. Hecht recounts Kamakura's once illustrious history as the seat of feudal government and its modern status as "a very peaceful community famed for its 'Daibutsu,' a huge forty-three foot bronze Buddha, into which one can climb like our Statue of Liberty, to review the surrounding countryside."[36] Hecht then describes the real purpose of his journey:

> *To me, the chief interest this time was to re-visit the exact spot on which my previous visit in 1924, quite near the big Buddha, rested the much smaller Buddha now in my garden in Pass Christian. I decided that though we could not reproduce the mountainous background, we had otherwise done very well in copying the Buddha's original setting.*[37]

Hecht is far too modest. Not only was the statue likely the grandest example of Tokugawa sculpture brought to America, its transportation - swaddled in cotton within a packing case the size of a box car, according to Costain - was both a feat of logistics as well an emblem of American economic hegemony and cultural appropriation.

Middlegate's architecture was as noted as its statuary, though without the same historical pedigree. In 1979, Middlegate Japanese Gardens were classed as a "significant property" in Pass Christian's Scenic Drive Historic District. In the support material, the Hecht residence at Middlegate was described as being "the most ambitious bungalow in the district and the only one surviving Hurricane Camille in 1969." The main residence, comprised of additions to Mrs. Watkins' 1911 "cottage," was not in the Japanese style of the garden structures, but used the same materials and was compatible with them.[38] During restoration, specialists discovered that the blue roof tiles on the tea houses, guest house, and pool house were not Japanese, but Italian, Ludowici-Celadon tiles, "Imperial Roman, full glazed dark blue, #L-120."[39] The barrel tiles were designed with an end cap made from an embossed image.

While the structures were in the "stick style" but crafted to look Japanese, the statuary, garden lanterns and garden stools were from Japan. Local contractor, Adolf Isadore DeMetz supervised creation of the garden's water features, which were hand dug and fed by artesian wells.

During the Hecht years at Middlegate, maintaining the gardens often involved several people. John and Anna Dambrink, immigrants from Germany and Holland, lived in the caretaker cottage and supervised maintenance. They retired in 1961 after Lynne Watkins Hecht's death.

MIDDLEGATE AS A SOCIAL SPACE

From its completion in the 1930s until its effective demise as a semi-public space after Hurricane Camille in 1969, Middlegate was a major regional and national attraction (Fig. 5), with most visitors coming from nearby, but some coming from around the county. During those years, the gardens were a popular setting for large and small social gatherings.

Some evidence of events at Middlegate comes from John Dambrink's stepson, Piet Stegenga, who worked

34. Cooper interview. Ironically, the vajra is sometimes called the "thunder stick."

35. Middlegate Japanese Gardens (Gulfport, Mississippi: Gulfport Printing Co., n.d.).

36. Rudolf Hecht, Around the Face of the Globe (New Orleans: Upton Printing Co. 1953), 86.

37. Ibid, 186.

38. Danny Taylor, AIA, Koch and Wilson Architects, New Orleans, Louisiana, Telephone Interview, November 2, 2002.

39. DeBuys, letter to Mr. R. S. Hecht, May 21, 1927, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Garden in Pass Christian, MS.

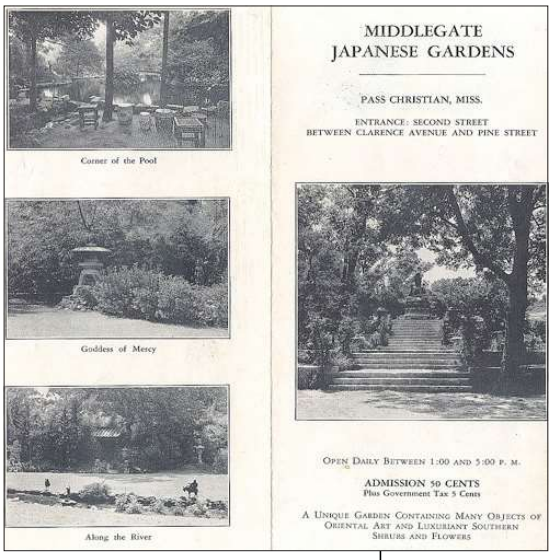

Fig. 5. Images and cover from the brochure, Middlegate Japanese Gardens *(courtesy of Pass Christian Garden Club)*

at Middlegate as a gardener. During parties and events in the garden, Piet would often dress as a coolie and pull a jinrikisha[40] full of people around the garden. For a wedding, the Hechts imported thousands of Easter lilies. Trainloads of people would come from New Orleans for weddings, parties, and events that took place in the gardens. The train stopped behind the Hecht property to let the party guests depart.[41]

Middlegate Japanese Gardens were a regular feature on garden tours beginning March 24, 1930 with the first annual convention of the Garden Clubs of Mississippi, when "Mrs. Hecht received more than 150 visitors assisted by her daughter, Dorothy, and entertained at an Azalea Tea."[42] Herman E. DeVries' sketch of "Hecht Middlegate Gardens" decorates the cover of a 1959 Pass Christian Garden Club pamphlet.[43] Throughout the year, the gardens were busy with family, civic and professional affairs. Children were often guests in the garden. A local newspaper stated that "Mr. and Mrs. Dambrink, caretakers at the garden, showed the children the garden and Mrs. Dambrink gave a talk to them explaining the plants, the figures of the gods, the pagodas and calling attention to the Japanese cherry trees now in bloom."[44]

Area newspapers recounted festivities held at the gardens, including a luncheon "for almost 500 people at the R.S. Hecht Pass Christian West Beach home on October 18, as the Louisiana Purchase Celebration was brought to a close."[45] "Pilgrimage, Pass Christian, Friday," a 1965 newspaper clipping from the Pass Christian Garden Club Archives records the last appearance of Middlegate Japanese Gardens in the annual Spring Pilgrimage of the Mississippi Coast Council of Garden Clubs.[46]

Fig. 6. A lone Kasuga lantern remains after hurricanes and time (photo, c.2012 , by and courtesy of Robert Alfred Brooks, Biloxi, MS)

Although private, the Hecht's gardens were also a popular tourist destination on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In 1935, the city of Pass Christian published a brochure highlighting local attractions, and promoting "Middlegate Japanese Gardens, a Glamorous Translated Bit of the Chrysanthemum Kingdom, open to Visitors Certain Hours Each Day."[47] Also listed in guides to Mississippi, and touted in promotional

40. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), Odate letter, February 10, 1926, purchase of jinrikisha.

41. Stegenga, Personal Interview, February 12, 2003.

42. "Garden Clubs Meeting Ends," Gulfport, Mississippi, Daily Herald, March 24, 1930, p.1.

43. Pass Christian Pilgrimage Program. Pass Christian Garden Club Archives. March 17, 18, 19, 1939.

44 "Fifth Grade Visits Hecht Garden at Pass," Gulfport, Mississippi, Daily Herald, April 4, 1930, p.6.

45. "Hecht Party Well Attended," Pass Christian Tarpon Beacon, October 31, 1953, p. 8.

46. "Pilgrimage, Pass Christian, Friday," Gulfport, Mississippi, Daily Herald, March 18, 1965.

47. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, Middlegate Japanese Gardens (AAG #MS040), letter, Office of the Mayor, Pass Christian, D. G. Rafferty, requesting Hecht approval of brochure.

brochures, the Middlegate Gardens were a local showplace.[48] In describing coastal points of interest, the author of *The Gulf Coast of Mississippi*, called Middlegate Japanese Gardens "the finest of their kind in America."[49] The "Middlegate Oriental Gardens also appears on the tourist map, "Mississippi Gulf Coast, Year-A-Round Vacationland."[50]

A GARDEN LOST

Until major damages caused by Hurricane Camille on August 17, 1969, Middlegate Japanese Gardens continued to attract national attention and serve as a place of display and celebration. After Camille, the once eminent landscape slid into gradual decline. Still compelling, the gardens maintained much of their original design structures and elements. Middlegate Japanese Gardens remained a gathering place for the Hecht family and friends who fondly recalled the weddings, traditional Easter egg hunts, and Twelfth Night Christmas Tree bonfires.[51]

However, August 29, 2005, marked a pivotal point in regional history when Hurricane Katrina's high winds and storm surge slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast, causing death and destruction in a multi-state area. Nature reclaimed much of the venerable landscape, leaving behind little but debris and a fading memory of what once was the dreamscape of Middlegate Japanese Gardens.

At one time the Hecht-Watkins families and Middlegate Japanese Gardens were well known in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast. Now those recollections are dying along with the generation that knew the garden and its patrons. In studying period documents and interviewing local people for my MA thesis of 2004, most of the information I uncovered was cursory. Specific details were few. Other than Rudolf Hecht's explanation of the Buddha, I could not find the provenance for any of the Japanese antiquities that made the garden significant. The private nature of families has left a fragmentary picture of the garden. Much of what I learned about the story of Middlegate Japanese Gardens came from people who shared their memories about how it influenced them, their community, and their garden.

In 2005, Lynne Farwell White discovered boxes of materials related to the history of Middlegate Japanese Garden. In sorting the materials she worked with Danny Taylor, New Orleans architect who did restoration work at Middlegate following Hurricane Camille. They created a site plan of Middlegate Japanese Gardens as the landscape existed in the 1930s. White went on to document the gardens for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Gardens in 2009, and these records, including post-Katrina photos (Fig. 6), are now available on-line.

Recently I returned to Pass Christian and visited what remains of the garden seven years after Hurricane Katrina. A brilliant blue sky highlighted the remnants of Middlegate's grand past. Once Katrina's tidal surge rolled out and the storm debris was cleared, opportunistic plants wove a tapestry over, under, and around what remained—brick pillars, Japanese lanterns, pottery shards, the concrete swimming pool, sunken garden, and concrete slabs. Middlegate's fountains are silent, the swimming pool waterless. Buddha is no longer on the property.

Middlegate, a place of exotic beauty that brought pleasure to so many, now moves on as part of an ever-evolving coastal landscape. The cries of sea birds combine with the rhythmic sounds from motor vehicle traffic, railroad trains, and the pounding of pile drivers expanding the Pass Christian Harbor. I am no longer in a sheltered, peaceful place and I feel sad.

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48. Mississippi, the WPA Guide to the Magnolia State, compiled and written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, Golden Anniversary Ed. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press, 1988), 297; and Middlegate Japanese Gardens. (Gulfport, Mississippi: Gulfport Printing Co., n.d.).

49. Nola Nance Oliver, The Gulf Cast of Mississippi (New York: Hastings House, 1941), 26.

50. Down South Magazine (August 1957), Biloxi, Mississippi, centerfold.

51. Tom Shellnut, President, Pass Christian Historical Society, interview, November 23, 2012.