2nd letter from John S. Stokes, Jr., to Jane A. McLaughlin

John S. Stokes

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Ms Jane A. McLau^hlin, Parish Historian  
25 Nobska Road  
Box 187  
Woods Hole, MA 02543  

Dear Ms McLau^hlin,  

It was good to meet you and chat with you, all too briefly, after the 9:30 Mass at St. Joseph's last Sunday. I hope that at some point we may be able to talk in more leisurely fashion.

Following up my letter of July 15th, I have completed a typed transcript of my Journal entries relative to the visits EdwardMcTague and/or I made to Woods Hole in 1952, 1953, 1954 and 1961 regarding the restoration of a broad variety of Flowers of Our Lady in St. Joseph's Mary Garden, and have listed the letters in our files associated with these visits, our contacts with Mrs. Lillie, and our search for the Emerson research (a total of some 136 letters).

Before making photo-copies of the more historically important letters, however, I want to write you while the historical sweep of this review is fresh in my mind. Then I hope to be able to complete the photo-copies in time to attach them to this letter and set it into your hand this coming weekend. (To reduce the volume of material, I will include only our initial or other especially important letters of contact with the people involved, so the others will do most of the reporting.)

One thing I failed to convey properly in my letter of July 15th, was that there was a "golden" period of active restoration in 1961 for a few years through the work of Mrs. A. George Gigger, Mrs. Lillie's Cousin (I mistakenly said "Niece"), an accomplished gardener and garden club president, and the caretaker she retained for the Garden, Mr. Nelson Cahoon. This was without any measure of parishioner participation, did not attain the variety I would like to have seen, and did not include a restoration of the Garden list or plant markers so those visiting the Garden would learn of the Flowers of Our Lady ... but Mrs. Gigger was moving in this direction, and the planting was vastly improved. The spirit of this restoration was caught in May 25, 1962 mail-away edition of the FALMOUTH ENTERPRISE, but ("would you believe?!") the copy of this is missing from my master file, so I don't have it at hand. My last visit with Mrs. Gigger was in 1964 or 1965, and after that I became intensely preoccupied with
an ecumenical center I was invited to head up in Philadelphia, and ceased putting time and energy into the Garden renewal, and in fact turned over the work of carrying forward Mary’s Gardens into the most competent hands of Bonnie Roberson in Idaho. Having now retired from both my business activities and the ecumenical work, I have now returned to Mary’s Gardens as my number one love and priority, and greatly regret I did not follow through closely with Mrs. Gipper. My recollection is that some time in the 60’s she was forced to curtail her activities due to family matters and failing health, but I had no involvement in the resulting transition in responsibility for the Garden, until my return to active contact this summer. Father Dalsell gave me the names of Rev. Wilbur J. Kingswell, whom I believe is Mrs. Gipper’s son-in-law, as present local representative of the Lillie Garden and Tower trust, and Mr. Stephen McInnis as the landscape gardener caring for the Garden... both of whom I hope to contact soon.

In reading over the record, I have a definite good feeling that our initial contacts with Mrs. Lillie, Mr. Wheeler, Miss Harrison, Dr. Emerson and Fr. Stapleton brought into focus and consolidated Mrs. Lillie’s founding vision and spirit, with the consequence that it began to bear new fruit with Mrs. Gipper and Mr. Cahoon... which I am confident will provide the basis on which to build and preserve continuity for the future.

Further, by 1960 our own research documentation of the old symbolical Mary-names of flowers — extending from England to Germany, France, Spain and Latin America — had come up with a vastly increased list of more familiar and commonly cultivated flowers which were named for Mary... which, in keeping with Mrs. Lillie’s hope for additions (1932 "Our Lady in Her Garden" plant list), made a wider variety of plant materials available for inclusion in the planting plan for maintaining variety, but also good continuity of color, and providing horticultural feasibility not available to Miss Harrison from Mrs. Lillie’s original of 1937 lists.

Our research of around that period was published in the form of MARIANA I, a list of over 600 plants suitable for cultivation in temperate climates, in the introduction of which we acknowledged our indebtedness to Mrs. Lillie, Mrs. Emerson, Mr. Wheeler, Mr. Dias, Mrs. Gipper and Mr. Cahoon. (Copy attached)

To bring this down to size for practical gardening, we prepared a shorter list of "200 Flowers, Shrubs and Trees for Sunny Mary Gardens", and a still shorter one... (80), based on horticultural desirability and local availability, of "Mary Garden Seeds, Bulbs and Plants Available in the Philadelphia Area" (both also attached). Also a list of 60 herbs.

Finally, we developed simple, clear garden designing and tending information for the assistance of beginning gardeners.

The purpose of all this was to make Mary-Gardening as simple and accessible as any other kind of flower gardening, so that with horticultural obstacles and blocks removed, Mary-Gardening would be essentially a matter of individual and community inspiration and motivation... at Woods Hole, and everywhere.

During this whole period, we were of course working with all these plant materials in our own Philadelphia Mary Gardens, and in 1956 I laid out a Mary Garden at my home of the exact bed dimensions of the Garden of Our Lady at Woods Hole (with the exception than I opened up the two sides the same as the front for access and circulation, since I was not bound by a road and a sea-wall). I was able to tend this entirely myself, in addition to extensive experimental nursery beds, with ease after a 10-hour a day job and all the correspondence and order-filling work of Mary’s Gardens, which I was handling at that time because of the poor health of Edward Mortague. I enclose some color xerox photos of this garden to show that it is possible to have a presentable garden with a wide variety of plants. (Pardon the poor quality of color xerox, but I didn’t have time for regular photographic color enlargements.)
Moreover, in 1965 I was asked by my Pastor to design and help establish a Mary Garden at the school in our parish: Our Mother of Consolation, in Philadelphia. I agreed to do this, with his assurance that a supporting committee of parishioners would be formed to provide depth for the garden tending and continuity. Drawing on our research, locally available plant materials, and our design experience, I designed and helped dig, plant and tend a Mary Garden with 64 varieties of flowers, per the attached planting plan and color xerox photo copies.

But, interestingly, the Woods Hole parish situation began repeating itself in my Philadelphia parish. Even though our pastor distributed articles on the Flowers of Our Lady and Mary Gardens, and arranged for me to present color slide lectures to the Sisters in the convent, the children in the school and the Women's Guild (all of which were enthusiastically received); and even though there were many accomplished men and women gardeners in the parish and there was a detailed planting plan and the plants were available from neighborhood nurseries... he and I were unsuccessful in developing a supporting committee for the Mary Garden, and in fact even the parish Grounds Committee which had other ambitious programs with the grass, trees and shrubs "wouldn't touch it". I and Bill Morgan, the parish custodian, who dearly loved the Garden and put all kinds of extra care into it, became the Wilfred Wheeler and Joseph Dias of our Garden.

Then came the day, in 1973, when I moved out of the parish and Mr. Morgan became incapacitated due to illness. After a year of almost total neglect, the main bed was grassed over and shrubs were put in front of the focal bed, leaving only several rose bushes and a few smothered residual plants.

Yet all during this period hundreds of letters and photographs were pouring in from all over the country, and from other countries, informing us of all sorts of Mary Gardens, large and small, which were being started. And more than this, as I traveled about I kept coming on modest Mary Gardens in all kinds of places. For example at St. Helena's Parish in Philadelphia, where I used to stop for morning Mass at times while driving to work, one morning I discovered a tiny statue and Mary Garden of 12 distinctly different individual Flowers of Our Lady adjacent to, or actually in a corner of, the rear outside wall of the church building... which I discovered was being quietly tended, almost unnoticed, by one of the sisters at the convent who had read an article about Mary's Gardens. Just as in the past year I have discovered a tiny figure of Our Lady tucked in behind some shrubs with a few Mary-plants in a front yard two blocks from my Boston residence, and a wayside Mary Shrine and small planting in a grassy meade about sixty miles west of Boston on the Massachusetts Turnpike.

From the parallel experiences in Woods Hole and my Philadelphia parish, juxtaposed to all the little Mary Gardens "popping up all over the place", I have come to understand, as I said in my letter of July 15th, that the first requirement for a Mary Garden is an inspired and committed Mary-Gardener who is moved to honor and pay devotion to the Blessed Virgin this lovely way, and who therefore finds spiritual nourishment and support from the care of and meditation on the symbolical plants from the richness of the old traditions of rural Christendom.

Looking at the St. Joseph's Garden of Our Lady from this viewpoint, then, I am inclined to believe that Mrs. Lillie made the same discovery as she talked with people in the Garden and community, and therefore included in her endowment funds for the maintenance and care of the Garden of Our Lady on a "straight horticultural basis", for preservation and continuity, in the hope, as Father Calvin said in his 1946 article, that persons would come forth in the future with the requisite special sense for the Flowers of Our Lady and Mary-Gardening required to fulfill her broader vision of love. It's sort of like the Oberammergau Passion Play, where it is hoped people will come forth through the years to play the roles of Christ, Mary, Pilate etc. The people of the community are hopeful, prayerful, nurturing and understanding about continuity, rather than remote and critical.
Therefore, as I mentioned to you on Sunday, I am much more sanguine, and, I hope wiser, now about the Woods Hole Garden of Our Lady. Instead of pressing for "restoration now", as I did with Mr. Wheeler, Miss Harrison and Father Stapleton, I am more disposed to leave things in the hands of Providence, let "the Lord build the house", and, as Father Dalzell said in his homily at Mass, seek to harvest only what is given to us rather than constantly looking for perfection (of the parable of the Wheat and the Tares or Weeds).

Actually, this is the lesson I learned from Mrs. Giger; as you will see from the correspondence, it was she who sought me out in Philadelphia on the basis of a referral by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society . . . not I who sought out her.

Therefore, I continue in the thought that I am sending you all this material first of all for all the historical information contained in the correspondence and Journal entries . . . which I hope will be useful to you, but part of the historical information is the development of the horticultural means for a more feasible Mary Garden, in response to Mrs. Lillie's original hope, and the development of an understanding of the kind of personal motivation and parish support required to maintain the Garden most fully . . . materially and spiritually.

It is my hope that somehow the Parish will develop and sustain through the years a knowledge of the Flowers of Our Lady and Mary Gardens, which are a part of our overall religious and cultural heritage, and also of the "Our Lady's Garden story" . . . so that from time to time there will emerge an inspired and committed Mary-Gardener, or several, or many — whether in the Parish, or the professional landscape gardener, or the trustee of the fund, or summer resident, or someone from outside the Parish — so that the Garden, together with the Angelus Tower, will continue calling the community, the scientists and visitors to honor the Incarnation, and to view all things in relation to life eternal.

To this end, as I mentioned Sunday, I hope that in addition to your Centennial Book, several repositories could be developed in Woods Hole for the larger assembly of historical records and notes, including the history of the Garden of Our Lady . . . such as at the Parish House, the historical house you mentioned, the Cape Cod Historical Society, the Falmouth or Woods Hole Public Libraries, the FAIRFAX ENTERPRISE, the Libraries of the Marine Biological Laboratories and Oceanographic Institute — to mention a few possibilities which occur to me.

Mindful of Mary's Gardens information and inspiration, I plan to round this out as a trilogy of letters by sending you, in a week or so, a collection of articles we have written along these lines through the years, and also articles and testimonials of others. I assume that all this vastly exceeds the amount of detail you need, or even want to take the time to read at this point, so, as in my previous letter, I have organized the various materials by numbered tabs so you can pick and choose. However, if there is any historical information you might want that I haven't provided, please let me know, and I will be happy to oblige if I can.

Sincerely yours in Our Lady,

John S. Stokes Jr.
for Mary's Gardens

Copies to: Father Dalzell
Miss Pyne
Mrs. Roberson

Enclosures: 1) Lillie Correspondence 5) 1954 Woods Hole Visit 9) List of '80 Plants
2) Emerson Correspondence 6) 1961 " " 10) Garden Design
3) 1952 Woods Hole 'Visit 7) MARTANA Research 11) Garden Stewardship
4) 1953 " " 8) List of 200 Plants 12) Final Mary Gardens