The story of any single human life might be told from a myriad of perspectives, at least some of which will inevitably reveal connections between the person who is the subject of the story and significant historical events or cultural developments in the larger world. Even so, the case to be made here—that the achievement of Katharine Smith Reynolds in realizing the creation of Reynolda, her estate in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, deserves proper recognition within the history of American landscape architecture—may seem to stretch unreasonably the accepted boundaries of that history. She was not, after all, a professional landscape designer, nor even an amateur one. She was a woman of the American South born in 1880, who became the wife of one of the original southern tobacco tycoons. She subsequently devoted herself—as did most women of her class and place—to home, family, church, and community. Although, as her husband’s fortunes expanded, she came to enjoy exceptional wealth and privilege, her social sphere remained fairly provincial; her life, moreover, was relatively brief. By the standards of any age she was a “doer,” energetic and ambitious, but she never possessed the independence and the authority to act that made men like her
husband influential figures in the world of business and public affairs, and ultimately earned them a place in history.

Few women, of course, even long after the achievement of suffrage early in the twentieth century, enjoyed educational or career opportunities equivalent to those of their brothers and husbands. In response to this reality, many contemporary historians have found it fruitful to examine the lives of women who devised strategies for attaining at least some measure of self-fulfillment by defying or subverting conventional expectations about their proper roles. Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s first helped heighten popular consciousness of historic inequalities, we have come to recognize the extent to which familiar and heretofore sacrosanct versions of the historical record are inevitably marred by omissions, distortions, subjective interpretation of “facts,” and cultural bias. The consequence has been a wholesome revisionist temper within the academy and elsewhere, prompting research aimed at recovering missing or neglected narratives that can, by illuminating the work of those whom earlier histories ignored, provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the times in which they lived.¹

The history of landscape architecture in the United States has offered a striking example of these fresh energies at work over the last thirty years or so. Up until then, contributions made by an admittedly small number of women to the profession, or more generally to the literature and practice of landscape design in America, were seldom formally acknowledged. Norman Newton’s 1971 Design on the Land, for many years the standard text used in introductory survey courses in departments of landscape architecture, included mention of just three women practitioners.² Just as increasing numbers of young women had begun entering these programs, many of them drawn by environmental interests that were also an outgrowth of a 1960s sensibility, events and publications marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of Frederick Law Olmsted, revered as the “father of American landscape architecture,” reintroduced this heroic nineteenth-
century figure to new generations of Americans. It would be fair to say, in fact, that these years marked the beginning of a gradual awakening, on the part of a whole class of educated Americans, to the realization that there were important connections between the quality of community and urban design and so-called quality of life. It was not long before women students, faculty, and professionals began to ask themselves, Where are the women? Who were they? What did they achieve, and how? Conferences, symposia, and a proliferation of publications, amounting by now to a substantial historical literature, have begun to explore the answers to those questions.

Not surprisingly, there were common threads of advantage that made it possible, from the late nineteenth century onward, for a small number of women to pursue careers related to some aspect of landscape design. Of the three women mentioned in Newton’s classic text, Marian Cruger Coffin (1876–1957) remained unmarried throughout her career, while Annette Hoyt Flanders (1887–1946) and Beatrix Jones Farrand (1872–1959) were married but childless. Ellen Biddle Shipman (1869–1950), whom Newton ought certainly to have included, was married and a mother of three but divorced in 1927, when divorce was still rare enough to be thought scandalous. More important, all of these women, and most of the others of their generation who practiced or wrote about landscape design, belonged to a social class in which women were not expected to earn their own living, and in which opportunities to obtain a good education and to travel were much greater than was the norm for the vast majority of American women.

Katharine Smith Reynolds belonged to the same generation, even to the same class, but her achievement in conceiving and creating Reynolda—not just the physical place but, as we shall see, something of a utopian experiment—was a personal and singular project, her life’s work. The only connection between this remarkable undertaking and the professional practice of landscape design was that Mrs. Reynolds was an enlightened client of
architects, landscape architects, and others on whom she depended for the professional expertise that would help her realize her vision. What engages our attention is the mystery of how a young woman of her circumstances could possibly have tapped in, intellectually and imaginatively, to the most progressive ideas of her era, and then put these radical notions to work in a complex agricultural and social enterprise on the edge of a small southern city.

Ladies, Language, and Landscape

To understand the significance of Katharine Smith Reynolds’s achievement, it may help to know something of the circumstances of her contemporaries who found access to more typical career paths as professional designers or influential writers on landscape subjects. There was just one woman among the ten professional landscape designers listed as charter fellows when the American Society of Landscape Architects was organized in January 1899. Only a few years earlier, Charles Eliot, a brilliant younger partner in the preeminent firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, had discouraged a colleague from trying to form just such a “league of professional men” by arguing that there were scarcely four or five sufficiently accomplished practitioners in the entire country, while the profession itself was still “generally unrecognized by the public.” Ironically, it was Eliot’s untimely death in 1897 that inspired his father, who was president of Harvard University, to establish there in 1900 the first academic program in landscape architecture. Until that time, the only avenue for a young man wishing to prepare for a career in the field was to find employment as an apprentice with an established firm.

At the turn of the twentieth century, opportunities for women to pursue either option—academic training or apprenticeship—were very few. Beatrix Cadwallader Jones, the lone woman among the founding members of the professional society (she became
Beatrix Farrand after her marriage in 1913), was so exceptionally fortunate in the circumstances of her birth, education, and social connections that her long and illustrious career merely dramatizes how difficult it was for women with fewer advantages even to imagine becoming, as Farrand preferred, modestly, to call herself, a “landscape gardener.” Her choice of this title for her design practice is significant, since the profession in this country had been renamed in 1863 by Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux, who began referring to themselves as “landscape architects” during the period when they were overseeing construction of Central Park in New York City.

Thirty years later, about the time that Beatrix Jones was living at Holm Lea, the Brookline, Massachusetts, estate of her mentor, Professor Charles Sprague Sargent of the Arnold Arboretum, another Brookline resident, Mrs. Schuyler Van Renselaer, published Art Out-of-Doors: Hints on Good Taste in Gardening, a book so popular among American readers that it was reprinted in 1914 and revised in a second edition in 1925. The author set out to demonstrate that landscape design ought to be considered a “fourth art,” equivalent in stature to architecture, painting, and sculpture, from which it followed that any genuinely cultured person should at least be familiar with its general principles and the most outstanding examples of its practice, both historic and contemporary. From this perspective, she maintained, Olmsted was clearly “the most remarkable artist yet born in America.” Moreover, although her book was mostly concerned with recommendation for improving the artistic quality of “home grounds,” Mrs. Van Renselaer was at pains to make her readers aware of the wider, civic scope of Olmsted’s profession, using as illustration his leadership role in planning the Chicago World’s Fair, which opened the same year Art Out-of-Doors was published. She did quarrel, however, with the new usage “landscape architect.” “Perhaps the best we can do,” she proffered, “is to keep to ‘landscape gardener,” trying to remember that it ought always to mean an artist, and an artist only.”
Beatrix Jones may have taken advantage of her mother's acquaintance with Mariana Griswold Van Rennselaer to seek the older woman's counsel during the time she resided in Brookline with the Sargent family. She must certainly have read her book eagerly, responding to its author's passionate appreciation of the art of landscape design, even though nothing in the text explicitly suggested that women should be attracted to the profession, although for "many young men" the "chances for employment . . . are growing better year by year, and surely there is no profession whatsoever . . . that suggests to the imagination so delightful an existence." Perhaps it was also Van Rennselaer's reservations about the designation "landscape architect" that prompted the younger woman's eventual decision to define herself instead as a landscape gardener. There is still another suggestion of the author's possible influence in a comment Jones later made in an interview published in the New York Herald, about a year after the founding of the American Society of Landscape Architects. After asserting that the business of landscape design is at once "hard work and perpetual pleasure," she observed that "with this grand art of mine I do not envy the greatest painter, or sculptor, or poet that ever lived. It seems to me that all arts are combined in this."

Beatrix Jones would also have relished another sort of book with a landscape subject written by a woman and published in 1893, poet Celia Thaxter's An Island Garden, a volume delightfully illustrated with paintings of the author's house and garden and Thaxter herself by her friend, the American Impressionist Childe Hassam. Jones would have been familiar, from summer holidays at her family's vacation home in Bar Harbor, with the rocky island scoured by wind and waves—Appledore, within the Isles of Shoals in the southern Gulf of Maine—where Thaxter had created her garden. Although Celia Thaxter enjoyed a modest literary reputation in her own right, her celebrity was strongly identified with the place that had formed her artistic sensibility and remained the focus not just of her writing but of her life. Thaxter had inherited and continued to operate after her mar-

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riage a fashionable resort hotel, Appledore House, to which many distinguished writers and artists brought their families on summer holidays. She lived, gardened, and presided over what appears to have been a New England version of the European salon in a charming cottage adjacent to the inn. The spectacular profusion of the garden’s flowers welcomed guests invited for an evening of conversation or music in her parlor. Here was a woman who had managed to define herself as an artist through a life devoted to letters and to what Victorian America recognized as the arts of the home, nurturing and domestic. In fact, Thaxter’s life on Appledore curiously epitomizes a cultural understanding of the proper model for the lives of privileged women that had prevailed for most of the nineteenth century. The woman romantically rendered in Hassam’s paintings is remote from the world of commerce and the stresses of urban life, focused instead on the creation and management of a beautiful home and garden—mistress of an island of refined culture sheltered from a harsh natural environment and the coarsening distractions of the world across the water.

From the perspective of that particular myth of femininity, it is significant that Celia Thaxter died the same year that An Island Garden was published, just as a new generation of women of her class were beginning, like Beatrix Jones, to seek educational and career opportunities beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother, teacher, or nurse. Thaxter’s acknowledged accomplishments in horticulture and garden design were appreciated as those of a superbly gifted amateur. In fact, they so enhanced the perception of her femininity that what must have been the complicating realities of her working life as writer and innkeeper never shadowed the glowing image of the lady in the sunlit garden. The same social assumptions not only influenced Mariana Griswold Van Renselaer’s decision to publish her book under the name Mrs. Schuyler Van Renselaer, but also made it impossible for her to acknowledge in print her belief that young women as well as young men ought to pursue careers as landscape architects. Yet in
insisting on her preferences for calling that profession “landscape gardening,” she was doing more than affirming its status as a form of art; consciously or not, she was emphasizing the historic traditions of horticulture, floriculture, and ornamental gardening as the foundation of landscape design. Precisely because these traditions had come to be increasingly associated with women’s interests over the course of the nineteenth century, Olmsted and Vaux had opted for a more masculine-sounding identification of their profession with that of architecture.

Andrew Jackson Downing, the nineteenth century’s most authoritative tastemaker in matters relating to home and garden, had addressed his popular Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, first published in 1841, to an audience of readers presumed to be exclusively male. All of the estates Downing used to illustrate the principles of appropriate residential design belonged to “gentlemen of taste,” many of whom he credited with having taken personal responsibility for design decisions relating to the architecture of the house and the layout of its grounds and gardens. American women, however, gradually took over a large part of such decision making as a natural extension of their responsibilities for household management and their proper interest in subjects related to the domestic sphere, which increasingly included residential design and the garden arts.

The marketing potential of this growing enthusiasm did not escape the attention of magazine publishers. In some instances, building and trade journals simply abandoned a predominantly male pool of subscribers in order to address the new audience of women eager for informative articles on architectural styles, interior and landscape design, and gardening. Scientific American Building Monthly became American Homes and Gardens; Keith’s Magazine on Home Building became Beautiful Homes Magazine. The Ladies’ Home Journal, which had begun publication in 1883 with a focus on fashions in clothing, manners, and cuisine, published illustrations of Frank Lloyd Wright’s first Prairie Houses in 1901. House Beautiful was founded in 1896, followed just five years
later by both House and Garden—subtitled An Illustrated Monthly Devoted to Practical Suggestions on Architecture, Garden Designing and Planting Decoration, Home Furnishing and Kindred Subjects—and Country Life in America. The latter venture, begun under the editorship of America’s foremost horticulturist, Liberty Hyde Bailey, was modeled on the highly successful English magazine Country Life, which in 1901 first introduced its readers to the innovative design of the English plantswoman and garden writer Gertrude Jekyll, soon to become the doyenne of residential garden design on both sides of the Atlantic.

Jekyll was less well known, particularly in the United States, when Beatrix Jones chose her as one of the three gardeners she planned to visit on a study tour of great European gardens which she designed with the help of friends within the profession, then set out on in 1895 accompanied by her mother. The two spent a memorable morning with Miss Jekyll in the garden of her home, Munstead Wood. However brief this personal encounter, the example of Jekyll—a single woman, then in her fifties, who had come to garden design relatively late in life, having earlier devoted herself to painting—must have immeasurably reinforced the young American visitor’s determination to establish herself as a professional landscape designer. There is no question that Jekyll’s style of garden design, and particularly her superb skills as a plantswoman, had a lasting influence on the work of Beatrix Jones Farrand over the course of more than half a century of distinguished practice.

The “New Woman” and the Landscape Arts

In singling out such women as Mariana Griswold Van Rennselaer, Celia Thaxter, and Beatrix Jones Farrand, we are looking at women who, whatever difficulties they may have faced in moving beyond conventional expectations, were careful never to put their respectability at risk. On the contrary, they preserved their status
as “ladies” within the familiar mores of a society in which men exercised superior authority not just in public affairs, but within the home as well. Many of the women who contributed to the burgeoning literature of gardening in this period actually took pains to portray themselves as nothing more than inoffensive amateurs, although they might subtly suggest that the male “experts” who wrote for the same audience could learn something from women with more hands-on experience of gardening.12

Inevitably, however, a more ardent and outspoken feminism began to make itself heard, challenging the presumption within American society that women were not entitled to full citizenship, owing to an innate fragility of mind and body in comparison with the male of the species. The suffrage movement that had begun as early as the 1840s gathered considerable force in the closing years of the century, particularly after the establishment in 1890 of the National Woman Suffrage Association from the merger of two previously separate organizations, one headed by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the other by Lucy Stone. During the next thirty years of escalating protest and struggle, ending with passage in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote, increasing numbers of American women self-consciously redefined earlier notions of femininity and ideal womanhood. This “New Woman,” whose understanding of her mission in life was alternately celebrated and castigated in the popular press, deplored her countrymen’s past failures to recognize the contribution already made by women in traditional roles to the advance of American civilization. She wanted more for herself: more respect for her intelligence and talents and more opportunities to participate in the affairs of the world outside her home. But the sudden determination of so many women to put aside conventional expectations of genteel femininity—understood as docility, delicacy of manner, and the cultivation of refined feelings rather than intellectual pursuits—and to demand a measure of independence in decisions affecting their own lives, aroused widespread apprehension even

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among many who recognized the legitimacy of the cause. This sense of foreboding was intensified by the perception that American society itself was changing too rapidly, that an entire way of life was threatened by accelerating urbanization, industrialization, and immigration.

Such anxieties actually fueled popular interest in finding ways to reconnect with an earlier, allegedly simpler and less stressful way of life associated with the nation’s mostly rural and agrarian beginnings. Few city dwellers, however, were so naïve as to imagine that their lot might actually be improved by heading back to the farm and the grueling physical labor required to wrest a living from the land. Theirs was a more pragmatic but at the same time romantic enthusiasm for the natural world and for a nostalgic version of what came to be described as “country life.” Liberty Hyde Bailey observed in 1901 that it was “becoming more and more apparent that the ideal life is that which combines something of the social and intellectual advantages of the city with the inspiration and peaceful joys of the country.”

Of course, the development of bucolic residential communities outside major cities was already well under way by the turn of the century. What was new was the increased participation in that movement of middle-class professional and working-class families. With a small plot of land, a yard, and perhaps a garden to care for, these new homeowners swelled the audience to which the literature of house and garden design was now addressed, creating publishing opportunities, as we have seen, for significant numbers of women—both ladies of the old school like Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer and a “New Woman” like Frances Duncan (1877–1972), who in 1907 became the first gardening editor of the country’s most influential women’s magazine, the Ladies’ Home Journal.

Frances Duncan’s career as garden designer, gardening writer, and novelist furnishes a good example of what it meant for a young professional woman to challenge the accepted order of things in what was, and for a very long time would remain, a
man’s world. As a girl growing up in New York and then Massachusetts, Duncan had advantages of social status and education similar to those that favored most of the other women who were able to pursue careers related to landscape design. After graduation from a private New England academy, where she was exposed to liberal ideas including the cause of women’s rights, she found a position at nineteen with a reputable Long Island, New York, nursery, where she hoped to begin a career in horticulture. During the four years she worked there, Duncan’s education broadened in ways she could not have anticipated, principally through the mentorship of an elderly German horticulturist who shared with her his knowledge of plants and encouraged her in an ambitious program of reading European philosophy, history, and political theory. She was forced to leave her job in 1900, after succumbing to a mental and physical collapse brought on, apparently, by a series of tragic events in her personal life. Duncan suffered over the course of the next few years from what was called at the time “nervous prostration”—severe depression, fatigue, and an incapacity for the kind of work that had previously given her so much pleasure. Eventually she found solace and a return to health in the simple rituals of gardening, a discovery that prompted her to begin writing about the art and craft of garden making, particularly its therapeutic effect on mind and body. Before long she had become the much sought after author of technical and historical articles for magazines such as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Century*, and *Country Life in America*, as well as novels that allowed her to explore her ideas about the meanings of gardens and gardening in the lives of men and women.

The pressures of her new career never diminished Duncan’s energetic involvement in the suffrage movement, with which she was strongly identified in the minds of her readers and, with more troubling consequences, her employers. Edward Bok, the founder and editor of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, who was nevertheless notoriously unsympathetic to the women’s rights movement, fired her from her position as garden columnist when she criticized in print an article
opposing suffrage for women that had appeared in the magazine. When Duncan finally married at thirty-seven, she was well enough known for her political activism for at least one newspaper account of the wedding to be headed “Suffragist Marries.” Later, when the husband who had won her heart through his own political activism proved incapable of supporting their family of three children, she resumed her writing career with a keener sense of financial exigency. She would experience at firsthand, however, the stigma that society still attached to mothers who aspired to professional careers. When she sent the manuscript of a new book to an editor with whom she was acquainted, he returned it with a note citing three reasons for turning it down: “Their names are John, Duncan, and Margery”—the children whose well-being now depended on their mother’s income from writing.

A Woman between Two Worlds

The life of Katharine Smith Reynolds and her primary role in the design and creation of Reynolda may appear at first to lack any significant connection to the lives of these few representative women who successfully pursued professional careers through the practice of landscape design, through writing about gardens and landscape, or through some combination of these two activities. Yet historians have recognized the singular importance of Reynolda as a “model” estate, significantly different, in its experimental agricultural agenda and village-centered communal life, from even those few among the great estates of the American country place era to which it bears a superficial resemblance. Reynolda was conceived, planned, and administered by a woman acting as client in her own right rather than in the supportive role of the client’s wife. That it might represent one of the most important women’s projects of its era—equivalent in importance, for example, to the pioneering achievement of architect Julia Morgan (1872–1957) in designing William Randolph Hearst’s San
Simeon estate on California’s central coast—seems not to have occurred to historians of American landscape design and planning. Morgan’s biographer, commenting that her own subject had been similarly neglected by architectural historians until at least the 1970s, wondered, “How had she managed to hide herself so successfully from history?”

In the case of Katharine Smith Reynolds, that question is easy to answer. There is probably no segment of American society, even today, more anonymous than that consisting of women whose principal identity is that of wife and mother and whose occupations are almost exclusively domestic in nature. Contrasting the personal autonomy that American society equates with manliness to the notion, persisting throughout most of the twentieth century, that women’s “proper sphere” was the home, one feminist historian noted wryly that “men never had a ‘proper sphere,’ since their sphere has been the world and all its activities.” However much authority Mrs. Reynolds garnered from her husband’s respect for her and his indulgence of her project, however much responsibility she assumed for civic endeavors not just at Reynolda but in the city of Winston-Salem, for most of her life she lived out the conventional expectations of her community for a girl from a respected family. Well brought up, and given the relatively unusual advantage of a college education, she married a wealthy industrialist and became as dutiful a wife and mother as she was a daughter.

The small-town southern culture into which Katharine was born was, after all, even more conservative on questions of how a young woman must behave to preserve her family’s good name and her reputation as a lady than was the more liberal and cosmopolitan culture of the North. Nevertheless, the years in which she came to womanhood—the last two decades of the nineteenth century—were precisely those in which the emergence of a new urban and industrial culture, of which her husband’s tobacco empire was just one manifestation, held promise of rescuing the South’s failed agrarian economy from the stagnation that had lin-
gered since post–Civil War Reconstruction. That new southern culture centered on the world of business and cities was also, inevitably, a seedbed of new social patterns and ideas, including even such heady notions as those proclaimed in the label “New Woman” and in the suffrage movement.

Growing up in the little town of Mount Airy, Katherine Smith (she would later change the spelling of her name to “Katharine”) appears to have been one of those bright, intellectually curious, somewhat serious young women for whom leaving home for college proves to be a turning point that sets the course of her future life. Although she was forced to withdraw from the State Normal and Industrial College before completing her degree, Katharine had already been exposed there to something much more momentous than the series of illnesses that may have permanently compromised her physical health. The charismatic educator, minister, and political activist Charles Duncan McIver, and probably others among the faculty of the recently established Normal School he headed, had challenged Katharine to become a “New Woman” through what amounted to a conversion of mind, heart, and soul. The ideal that they held up to students preparing for careers in teaching and in business was that of a woman who claimed new rights and responsibilities for herself, but not in a scandalous or aggressive way, nor by rejecting woman’s traditional role as guardian of the well-being of the family. On the contrary, Katharine and her classmates were encouraged to see themselves as called, in the spirit of “noblesse oblige” but also in the spirit of a missionary Christian zeal, to engage with selfless ardor and commitment both the traditional work of women and the careers now opening up for them. By working strenuously to improve the homes, schools, and communities they served, these women graduates would soon constitute a significant social force striving to move the South toward a more humane, enlightened, and progressive future.19 Perhaps it was the very brevity and excitement of this first, intense college experience that made it so precious a memory for Katharine.

Introduction
She was sent to another college, Sullins in Virginia, to finish her education in an academic environment more typical of what was believed best for young ladies from good southern families. Her new classmates thought of themselves more as carefree college girls than as "New Women," and looked forward with delicious anticipation to imminent courtship and marriage. Katharine had no trouble accepting the girlish dream of a thrilling romance as prelude to an equally blissful married life. But at the same time, she must have recognized with some apprehension the difference between herself and most of her less serious classmates—a difference subsequently reinforced by her spending the next few years as a single woman. She was twenty-four when she accepted the marriage proposal of Richard Joshua Reynolds, her cousin and a man thirty years her senior.

R. J. Reynolds was far from being an opportune last chance for Katharine Smith. In combining gallantry and an endearing need of her with a reputation for legendary daring in his business deals and a sporting man’s personal style, he seemed a strikingly larger-than-life figure. Katharine fell in love with him easily and passionately. But marriage and the childbearing that followed—four children in their first six years together—added physical and emotional stress to the other responsibilities she assumed as mistress of a large household, hostess to the high society of Winston-Salem, and active participant in local charitable and educational causes. The management of so busy and complex a domestic and social life gave Katharine ample opportunity to use her organizational skills, but these daily preoccupations also threatened to distract her from larger ambitions. Not for long, however.

There can be no question that Katharine thought of herself, and was perceived by others, as first and foremost a wife and mother. It would have been quite impossible for a woman in her position to aspire to any occupation that enlisted her intellect and talents in significant work outside her home. The wife of R. J. Reynolds might understandably have felt obliged to abandon any hope of living out the promise of the “New Woman” of the twen-
tieth century, had she not been first inspired by the model of the feminine ideal that Charles Duncan McIver had impressed upon his students. McIver had framed the ideal of the “New Woman” in religious and moral terms, so that Katharine, feeling the power of her own gifts but pious as well, could embrace it not as a form of secular liberation but as a sacred calling. The historian Leslie Close, in writing about the difficulties so many women faced in earning respect and credibility in landscape careers up until the 1930s, observed that for many of these pioneering women, “one answer was to create paths of their own.” That was obviously the resolution that Katharine Smith Reynolds formed during the early years of her marriage. A woman possessed of “a head for business” need not be forced to choose between the traditional responsibilities of married southern ladies and the mission that McIver urged upon educated women in the “New South” that was
being everywhere proclaimed. Katharine would not be caught be-
tween these two worlds; she would live in a better world of her
own making.

“The Art That Is Life”

There were other currents abroad in the land during the years just
before and after the turn of the century to support Katharine in
her conviction that the ordinariness, even the banality, that in-
hered in conventional domestic life and middle-class society need
not deprive her of the chance to pour her energies into some great
project. Katharine had studied art in college, even taught an art
class in Mount Airy during the year after her graduation. As Be-
atrix Jones Farrand understood, just to think of oneself as an artist
is liberating; for Farrand, identifying herself as an artist meant
that she was proof against the indifference and contempt of male
colleagues. There is an infamous description of Farrand, attrib-
uted to Frederick Law Olmsted, as a woman “supposed to be in
some way inclined to dabble in landscape architecture.”21 For
Katharine, thinking of herself as an artist meant that sacrificing
any possibility of a professional career to the demands of home
and family need not require that she turn her back on her own
sense of who and what she was, and was meant to be.

The early years of the twentieth century—eventful years for
Katharine, before and after her marriage in 1905—were a time
when art and design were turning dramatically inward to focus on
the arts of the home. The magazines and books aimed at young
married women interested in fashion and the decorative arts, as
Katharine certainly was, were full of enthusiasm for the work and
reforming spirit of designers and architects inspired by the ideals
of the English Arts and Crafts movement. On both sides of the
Atlantic, the movement marked a reaction against what was per-
ceived to be the decadent opulence of Victorian taste, including
the inflated neoclassicism of Renaissance Revival and Beaux-Arts
styles. While those in the vanguard of the movement might propose very different strategies for promoting simpler, more rational and authentic modern styles, they shared the belief that changes in work and community life brought about by the industrial revolution were responsible for the erosion of quality in consumer goods, in home design and furnishings, and in architecture and the landscape.

One such reformer, the Philadelphia architect William L. Price (1861–1916), helped to found Rose Valley, one of several noteworthy experimental communities of artists and artisans who attempted to put the values of the Arts and Crafts movement to work in actual settlements, usually in rural settings. In addition to the furniture, pottery, and books produced during the eight years of Rose Valley’s existence, Price published a journal between 1903 and 1907, The Artsman, to which he gave the subtitle The Art That Is Life.22 By affirming an ideal that reconnected ordinary life with the making of art, this simple but highly charged phrase captured the powerful appeal that the American Arts and Crafts movement would have for a woman like Katharine Smith.
Reynolds, who aspired to art but had obligations to home and family that made the pursuit of “high” art and traditional heroic models of the artist impossible for herself. In the years before her marriage, Katharine had delighted in mastering many of the domestic arts practiced by women of her generation; she sewed beautifully and enjoyed painting china. Now she came to understand that her mission as mother and matron, and as an educated woman married to the richest man in Winston-Salem, demanded that she commit her life to a much nobler and more exalted art. Nothing within the domestic environment—no space, no object, no event—was unworthy of being artfully transformed into something beautiful and meaningful.

If this potential elevation of the home—and homemaking, in a literal sense—to a significant form of art suited both Katharine’s natural instincts and the circumstances of her life, certain ethical and philosophical strains of Arts and Crafts theory would confirm her sense that she had finally found a way to put into practice the principles instilled by her education and her religious faith. William Morris (1834–1896), who as artist, writer, and entrepreneur was the leading spokesman for the English phase of the movement and was influential in the United States as well, had been so troubled by the difficulties he and his followers encountered in extending the goals and goods of the movement to working-class men and women that he had posed the question, “What business have we with art at all, unless all can share it?”23 While Morris and some few others took up the cause of reform through socialist political action, most adherents of the Arts and Crafts philosophy were suspicious of national programs and organizations. They dedicated themselves instead to advancing democracy at the local level, either as individuals or within guilds of craftsmen and vibrant small communities of the like-minded, such as Will Price’s Rose Valley outside Philadelphia. Town meetings in Rose Valley were modeled on the community gatherings described in Morris’s utopian novel News from Nowhere.24

Price was also one of the founding members in 1883 of the T-
Square Club, which, by serving as a forum for Arts and Crafts ideas through sponsorship of lectures, exhibitions, and publications, helped to foster in the area around Philadelphia one of the most cohesive and dedicated fraternities of artists, designers, craftsmen, and architects anywhere in the country. Although Katharine Reynolds is bound to have learned a good deal of what she knew about this new aesthetic from books and magazines, she was just as much educated in these matters by frequent exposure to Philadelphia. Her husband had so many business, professional, and social connections there that they became very familiar with the city and its environs. She would select Charles Barton Keen (1868–1931), a distinguished graduate of the architectural program at the University of Pennsylvania, and a man thoroughly schooled in the design traditions and aesthetic values of the T-Square Club, as architect of Reynolda. Her principal landscape architect after the initial phase of site development, Thomas Sears
(1880–1966), was part of the same Philadelphia circle, and had already earned a reputation as a skilled garden designer when Katharine hired him for a major expansion and elaboration of Reynolda’s formal gardens.

In the debate that surfaced within the American Arts and Crafts community on the issue of whether the products of machine technology might be integrated with those employing traditional handicrafts without sacrifice of quality, the Philadelphia School, for which the T-Square Club served as a nexus of dialogue and influence, became strongly identified with the conservative stand. For the most part, this group was unsympathetic toward Frank Lloyd Wright’s efforts to persuade the Chicago Society of Arts and Crafts that ways might be found, through collaborations between artists and manufacturers, to apply modern industrial processes to the production of materials and objects meeting the highest artistic standards. By comparison with other centers of Arts and Crafts activities in the Northeast, the Midwest, and California, the Philadelphians remained, according to one historian, “idealistic and insular” in their retreat from the city to a romanticized rural and suburban landscape that represented, to their minds and those of their clients, the last stronghold of a way of life marked by civility and grace, in harmony with the rhythms of the natural world. The residential properties they designed drew on sources in the vernacular building traditions of rural Pennsylvania and Delaware and the English countryside to project an image of continuity with the past, of rootedness in the land and the good life lived close to nature.

In this respect as well, the designers Katharine found in Philadelphia were a good match for her own taste and sensibilities. Especially after the birth of her children, she felt strongly attracted to country life, with its promise of cleaner air, purer water, and more opportunities for healthful physical exercise outdoors, to say nothing of the spiritual and emotional satisfactions of a life lived in beautiful natural surroundings. While these advantages also motivated countless numbers of her countrymen to move out
of the city to greener suburban and rural enclaves, they had added importance for Katharine because of the lingering effects on her own health of the illness she had suffered late in her adolescence. Moreover, she had seen for herself, while traveling with her husband in rural England and Scotland during their European honeymoon, just how seductively peaceful and charming were those scenic farms and villages that had inspired the picturesque landscapes so favored by the Philadelphia School.

From the beginning Katharine understood her project as a complex program of land development, one that everyone but her husband would assume to be entirely unsuited to the capacities—much less the proper occupations—of a southern matron. The farm and its successful operations came first in her planning, followed by the landscape of the “home place,”27 an area surrounding the main house that included expansive lawns, a small lake, and woodlands, as well as an adjacent village of workers’ homes and gardens, schools, a church, workshops, farm buildings, and a greenhouse complex with formal gardens. Yet although the estate might in certain respects resemble others of the country place era, Reynolda was an experimental farm and community not just from an agricultural, technological, or architectural perspective, but in the philosophy and goals that inspired its creation. Katharine’s vision represented a unique confluence of progressive and populist ideology with a distinctively southern understanding of community as a people formed by a common history, religious traditions, and folkways who flourished best when “rooted,” to borrow the words of William Butler Yeats, “in one dear perpetual place.”28

Thus the real meaning of the landscape of Reynolda had less to do with its beauty or modernity than with the values and moral force with which a gifted and ambitious New Woman of the New South energetically invested it during her lifetime. Reynolda should represent exceptional opportunities for all whose lives it touched—a welcoming and supportive home and workplace where living well counted for just as much as living virtuously, and the promise of a better future just as much as the storied past.
Katharine’s strategy in achieving these ends was to apply to a working farm and a community of ordinary people the Arts and Crafts ideal of elevating and transforming daily life by approaching its every aspect as essentially a work of design. Art had been her vocation; Reynolda would become at once her mission and masterpiece—analogous, in its human and temporal dimensions, to performance art rather than a material object. Her search for designers capable of capturing in physical form the intangible environmental qualities that she wanted the estate to embody generated a creative process in which she played a defining role, just as she did in taking responsibility for the complex and productive interactions within the community and between the community and other groups and institutions.

Like women of later generations who would struggle to balance the multiple demands of their domestic and working lives, Katharine Reynolds believed that she could “have it all,” while maintaining the highest standards in every detail. Her untimely death threatened not only the survival of the estate as a farm, home, and community, but eventually the loss of public awareness of the social and cultural significance of the project as originally conceived. Nevertheless, in spite of the vagaries of time and changing circumstances, enough memories, records, and original architecture and landscape have survived to frame a narrative of Reynolda’s beginnings, as vision and as place, that illuminates a remarkable continuity between past and present, as if Katharine’s indomitable will and spirit were still at work.