

The Matheson Legacy at River Farm

by Courtney Capstack

THE AMERICAN HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY (AHS) and the gardening community of the greater Washington, D.C., area recently lost two long-standing friends and contributors who had strong links to the Society's River Farm headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia. On December 14, 2007, **Emma Tompkins Matheson** died at the age of 94 from complications caused by a stroke. A week later, her husband of 72 years, **Malcolm Matheson, Jr.**, also 94, died of respiratory failure.

Malcolm Matheson, Jr. spent much of his childhood living at River Farm. His father, **Malcolm Matheson, Sr.**, moved to the property, which was then known as Wellington, with his wife and children in 1919. The Mathesons made significant improvements to the



grounds over the years, building a new wing on the estate house and adding plantings of perennials, boxwoods, and trees, many of which still flourish today.

In 1936, Malcolm Matheson, Jr., married Emma Tompkins—known to her friends as Pinkie—and the couple settled in a home near River Farm.

Malcolm Matheson, Sr., put the property up for sale in the early 1970s, and the AHS purchased it for its headquarters in 1973 with the aid of a generous contribution from the Enid Haupt Charitable Trust. “At last, gardening has a home,” exclaimed **David G. Leach**, the Society's president at the time. Prior to the acquisition of River Farm, the Society's staff had been split between a crowded office in Alexandria and the Plant Records Center at the Tyler Arboretum in Lima, Pennsylvania.

THE MATHESONS AND THE WHITE HOUSE CONNECTION

Another part of the Matheson legacy at River Farm is a set of wrought iron gates that originally graced the White House for over a century, from 1818 through the 1930s.

According to historian **William Seale**, the Charles H. Tompkins Construction Company was often contracted to work at the White House during the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt. During a renovation project in 1936 and 1937, the gates were removed from the northeast entrance. At the time, White House contractors could dispose of unused materials at their discretion, and it is thought that Tompkins gave the gates to the Matheson family around the time of his daughter Emma's marriage to Malcolm Matheson, Jr., which coincided with the renovation. The gates were later installed at the front entrance of River Farm, where they remained until 2002.



The restored White House Gates now welcome visitors to River Farm.

Seale, a former AHS Board member, was instrumental in identifying the historic origins of the gates, which have since been restored to their original glory and are now prominently displayed at the entrance to a mixed border near the front of the Estate House. —C.C.

The Mathesons' contributions to horticulture extended well beyond the grounds at River Farm. “My mother was an excellent gardener, flower judge, and flower arranger,” says **Lida Stifel**, one of Malcolm and Emma's six children. Emma served two terms as president of the Garden Club of Alexandria, Virginia; was a director of the Garden Club of America; and served on the Dumbarton House Gardens Committee while a member of the National Society of Colonial Dames of America.

An active member of the AHS, Emma served on the Society's Board of Directors from 1981 to 1983, was on the AHS Advisory Council from 2003 to 2007, and received the AHS's Local Horticulture Award in 2004. Both Malcolm and Emma had been Haupt Associates members of the AHS President's Council since 2003.

“Mr. Matheson was the perfect gentleman—but with wit and humor,” says **Stephanie McLellan**, a former AHS employee and long-time neighbor to the Mathesons. “Mrs. Matheson was quite the lady in her ‘garden’ hat and always just as quick as her husband with a quip and a laugh. Mr. Matheson's boyhood home was very dear to both of them—and I think a major reason that they supported so many AHS projects over the years.”

Malcolm and Emma Matheson were committed to the welfare of the AHS and River Farm, never hesitating to offer help and advice when needed. Their presence will be missed at River Farm, but their legacy will continue to live on as an integral part of the AHS's history.

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