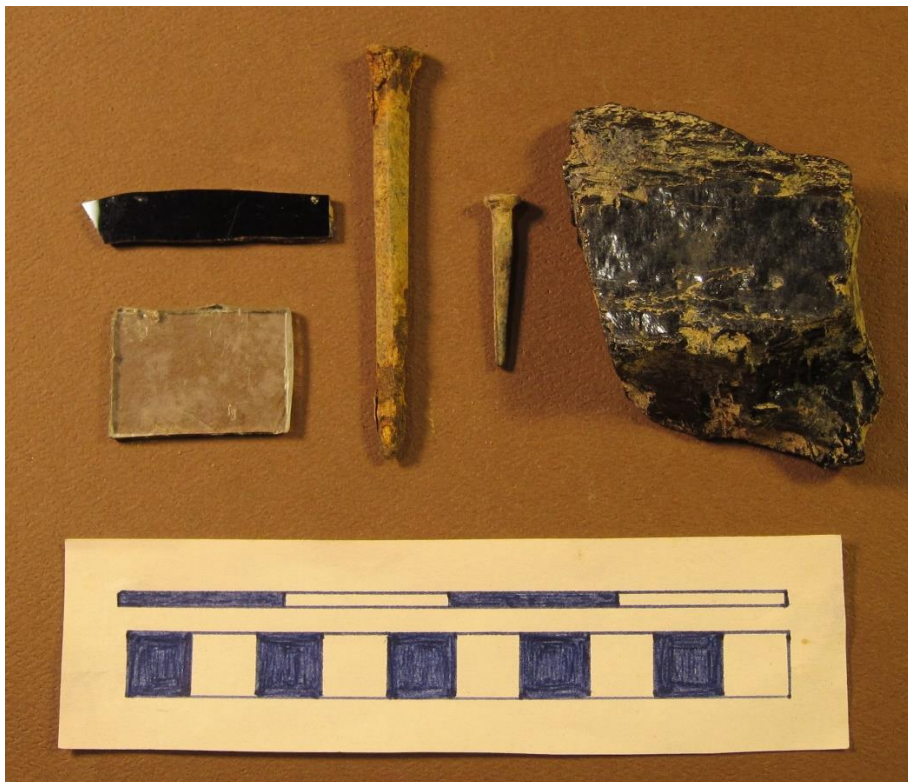


# Archaeology at the Montgomery Place 1840-1880 Tropical Plant Conservatory

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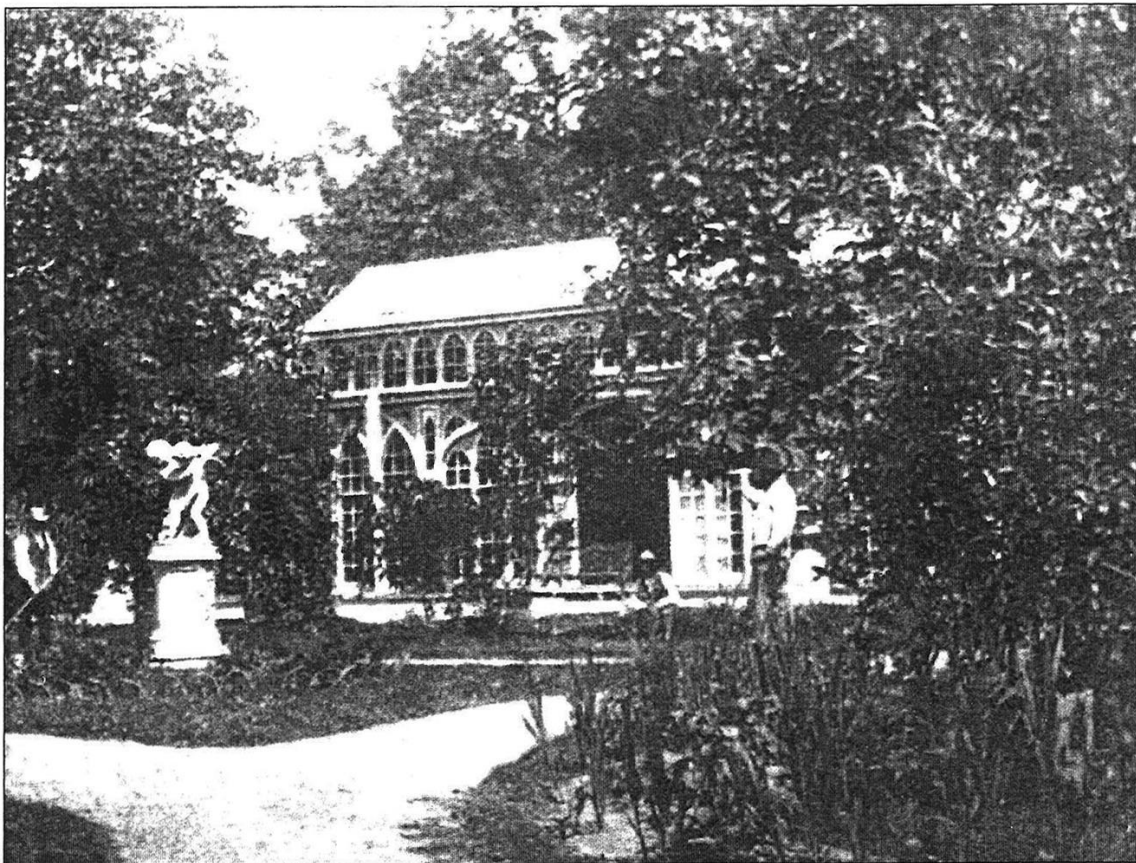
This exhibit highlights representative materials from two seasons of excavation at the former Barton/Gilson (1840-1880) Conservatory of exotic plants at Montgomery Place. The fragments of diverse 19th-Century ceramic vessels serve as the most datable portion of our sparse findings, which mainly have been flat glass shards, rusted nails, brick pieces, and coal.



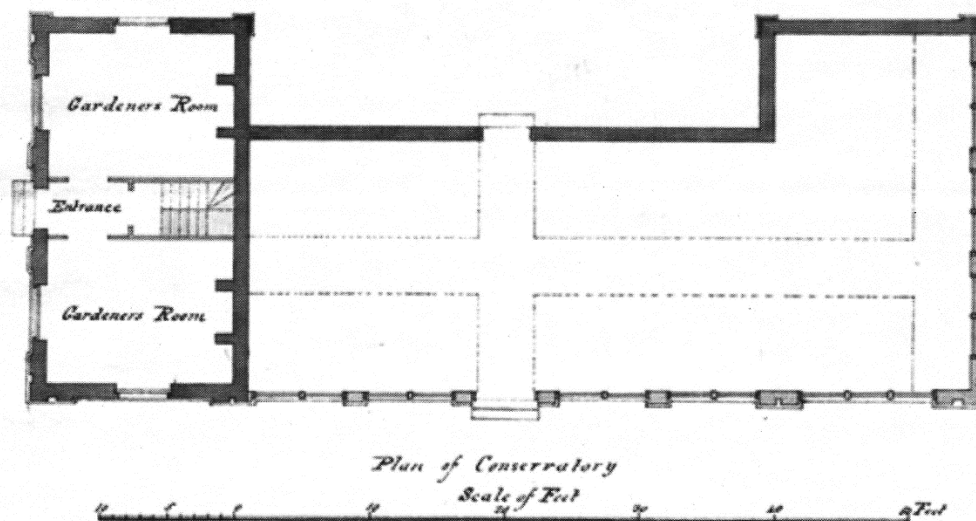
The variety of ceramic tableware indicates this was the scene of domestic activity by gardener Alexander Gilson, son of Sarah (Sally) Gilson, an emancipated domestic for the Montgomery/Barton family. The sherds below classify as blue-decorated porcelain, polychrome hand-painted pearlware, blue transfer-printed white earthenware, and brown hand-painted red earthenware. All were typical of the early to middle 19<sup>th</sup> Century in this region.



Alexander Gilson, their probable owner, himself may be the person sitting with two co-workers standing, in the undated photograph of the Conservatory that he managed (Montgomery Place Archives, Bard College).

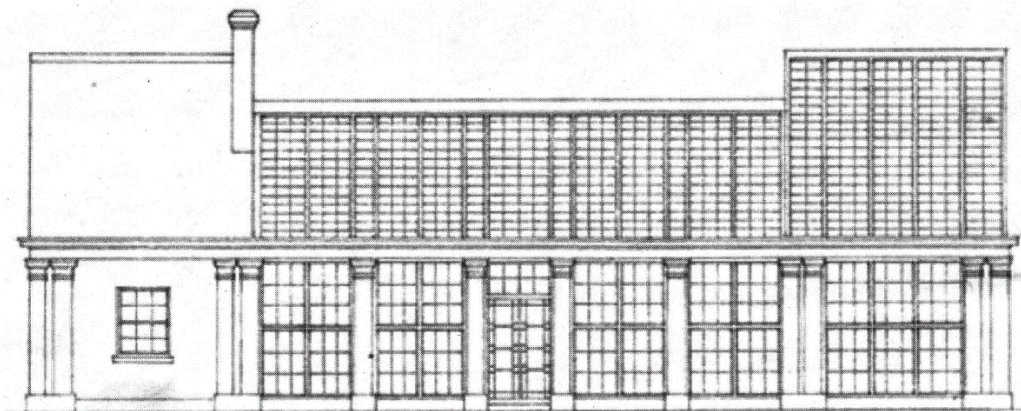


At the northeast end of Montgomery Place's Conservatory were two rooms labeled "Gardeners" (sic) on the 1839 floor plan by its architect, Frederick Catherwood (Montgomery Place Archives, Bard College).



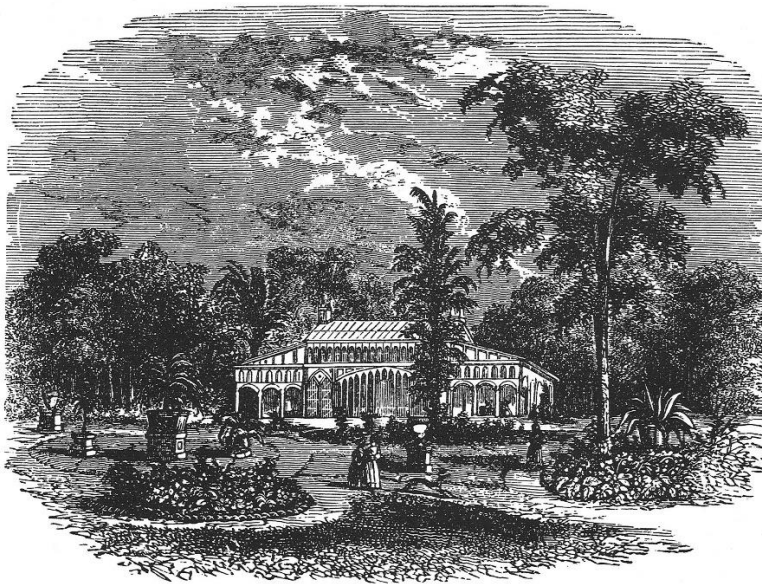
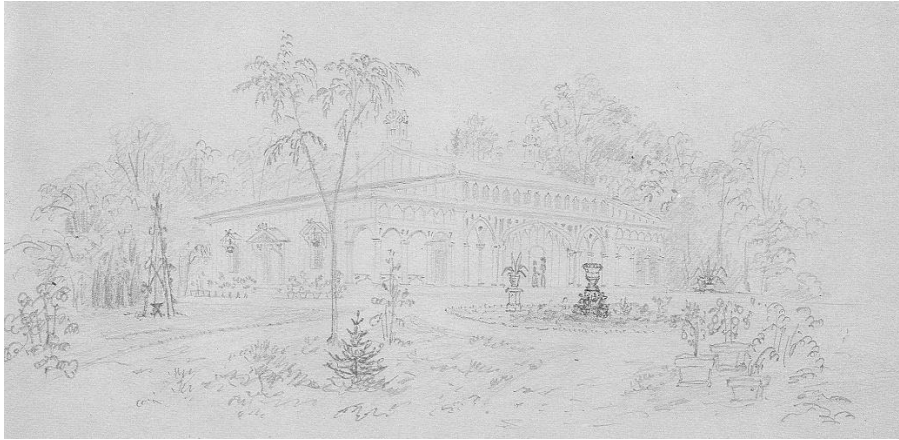
*West*

His drawing of the Conservatory façade has a chimney, likely above a stove that a worker stoked to keep the greenhouse warm in cold weather.



*Elevation facing the West*

Sketches in the 1840s by the architect A. J. Davis show chimneys at both ends of the main greenhouse (Avery Library, Columbia University, and from the 1847 journal, *The Horticulturalist*, by Andrew Jackson Downing).



Northwest Facade of Conservatory, from Sketch by Davis (in Downing 1847)

We found, buried in a low mound of coal near the site margin, several ceramic sherds, a rake with broken tines, and a mower blade that was badly bent.



Fragmentary hand-made bricks from the building's foundation appeared in a cluster on the wooded site margin. Numerous nails spread across the site came from the wooden frame to hold the panes of glass of the greenhouse and the sheathing that weatherproofed the gardener's rooms. His dwelling place likely also served for potting plants. Test excavations of less than 1% of the gardener's rooms and adjacent yard uncovered seven flower pot rims in different styles.



Previously, the Conservatory had replaced Janet Livingston Montgomery's vegetable garden from the early 1800s, according to analysis of historical records. Both may have drawn water from a spring close at hand, a ravine today. After the Conservatory's removal, the level garden area was used for games of tennis on a clay surface, later shallowly buried by top soil. More recently, covered by grass, its lawn became a croquet court (evidenced by wickets, near the surface).





Excerpt from the final paper by Nova Muhammad, Bard '24, in Anthropology 290 'Archaeology of African-American Farms, Yards, and Gardens' quoted with permission of the author.

.... I myself never personally subscribed to a specific religion, and I never fully made connections between the variety of religions practiced in my family and their ancestral origins to Africa, until this class. In Archaeology of African American Farms, Yards, and Gardens, we studied the artifacts found at plantation sites in the eastern and southern states of the U.S. Many of the readings discussed in class spoke about how the Northeast direction is extremely important in West African religions, and how backyards were viewed as the bridge between the spiritual world, a hotspot for spirit activity. I thought back to how my namesake, my aunt, is buried under a willow tree in my grandmother's yard, facing the Northeast. Around her gravestone lies many stones and rocks....

In the Montgomery Place site our class dug at, a rake, mower blade, and flower pot pieces were found. These artifacts were found at famed Alexander Gilson's residence, an African American gardener. A question that kept coming up during our dig sessions was whether or not Gilson had any specific connection to Africa or African spirituality, which still remains inconclusive. These questions made me think of my maternal grandmother. She's arguably more creolized than my dad's side of the family, born and raised in Shreveport, Louisiana, then moved to Los Angeles in her young adulthood. My grandmother, who attends the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in LA, and who doesn't have much connection to Africa, is the most amazing gardener I know. She spends most of her time in her backyard, a wonderland of large fruit trees and a variety of flowers. I wonder if Gilson was similar to my grandmother, and had connection to West African spirituality, not through blatant spiritual practices, but through a genuine love of the yard, and of the earth.

...The seeds that were sown in Africa, were passed down through generations, surpassing all the traumas and horrors of slavery. The artifacts that were found showed physical evidence of these ties, and allowed me to feel more connected to both my family, and my ancestors.