



## **Southern Gardens Series**

By Thornton F. Jordan, Ph.D.

### **Cut-work Parterre Gardens and Sanded Paths**

Like most Southern antebellum gardens, Westville's gardens represent the fashion known as cut-work parterre--that is, a layout of symmetrical, geometrically formal, raised flower beds frequently bordered with boxwoods and separated by sanded paths. This Formal style (also called Ancient, or Geometric) followed an older Continental rather than the "modern" English fashion of the mid-19th century. The Formal style had prevailed in England until about 1700. In 1712 and 1713, Addison and Pope had published essays to shift the English taste towards the Natural style (also known as Modern or Irregular) of asymmetrical beds with more flowing, natural lines cut out of grassed lawns. But at the same time, in 1712 John James of Greenwich had published *The Theory and Practice of Gardening* from the French work of Dezallier d'Argenville. This work provided the models for the dry path cut-work parterre gardens which continued to be popular in Holland, Italy, and parts of France through the mid-19th century.

Why such a gap in the two fashions? Since England was depleting her original forests, the shift to the gardening design that Pope and Addison recommended reversed the trend to impose classical order on nature and to let nature flourish more "naturally." In America, frontier towns even of the early 19th century were surrounded by wilderness, so the urge to impose geometric order in gardens demarcated the civilized from the wild.

The preference for sand or gravel paths in America was both fashionable and practical, especially in the South. England's moist climate supported grass, but the South faced a different situation. Because of the summer heat, Southerners shaded their houses with trees, and very few varieties of grass would grow in shade. In fact, the "grass" that the noted American landscape architect A. J. Downing recommended was actually a blend of two clovers, red top (*Augustis vulgaris*) and white clover (*Trifolium repens*). By 1846 Downing had heard of Kentucky bluegrass but had not yet tried it. In the 1830's Fanny Kemble's gardener on St. Simon's Island had introduced Bermuda grass to coastal Georgia. But, in general, grassed lawns and garden paths were the exception in the South with its hot summers. Moreover, to get a fine cut in 1850, mowing had to be done with a razor-sharp, broad blade scythe when the grass was damp. As a result, Downing wrote that "there are but few good lawns in America" by 1846. Of the two he mentioned, one was in New York and one near Philadelphia.

Westville's six formal gardens are in the traditional Continental style. At the store, the Grimes-Feagin House, the Bryan-Worthington House, and the Patterson-Marrett farmhouse these geometrical, symmetrical raised flower beds are bordered with brick or rock and separated by sand paths. At the MacDonald House and the Moye House boxwoods line the geometric borders. As was typical of a western frontier town of the 1830s, all three gardens lie within wooden picketed fences to keep animals out and the surrounding wilderness at bay.