

Bard Montgomery Place Podcast

0:00 Josh: Hi everyone, and welcome to our latest edition of our podcast series. Today we'll be talking about our Montgomery Place campus, and we have a great panel here for you. I'm Josh Tyler, I'm one of the Assistant Directors of Admission, also graduated from Bard in 2006 as an undergraduate and also from the MAT program in 2008. I'm here as always with Mackie Siebens.

0:23 Mackie: Hello Josh! As Josh said, I'm Mackie Siebens, I'm the Director of Admission, and I graduated from Bard in 2012. Josh mentioned we're joined by our colleagues here on campus, who can talk about Montgomery Place in various capacities. We're going to start with introductions, and I'll hand it over to Myra to introduce yourself.

0:42 Myra: Hi, I'm Myra Armstead, I teach history, I'm a professor of history.

0:47 Helene: I'm Helene Tieger, a college archivist, also an alumna from the class of 1985.

0:54 Amy P: Amy Parrella, class of 1999. I am responsible for the arboretum and the horticultural department here at Bard.

1:06 Amy H: and I'm Amy Husten, I'm the managing director of Montgomery Place, and I've been at Bard for almost 8 years.

1:12 Josh: So, to start, our first question is what exactly is Montgomery Place, and what are its origins?

1:22 Myra: Well Montgomery Place is today a national historic site. It's on the registry of national historic sites. It is now a newly a 380-acre estate. It started out about 100 acres smaller, it was conceived and built by Janet Livingston Montgomery, a widow who started this whole place in 1802. We do want to acknowledge that before it became Montgomery Place, it was territory that was occupied by the Lenape people, a Native American indigenous group. The Dutch came and introduced a patroonship system of land distribution. There were several owners. Eventually it came to Janet Livingston Montgomery as a widow, she lost her husband, and decided that she wanted to establish an independent estate in memory of him. In the 19th century, it became famous for its beautiful landscape, and that is even today what people look for when they come to visit the place.

1:24 Mackie: And Amy, can you talk a little bit about why the college came to acquire Montgomery Place? There is an entrepreneurial spirit here that I think is reflected in the purchase, but maybe you have some other things to say about that too.

2:59 Amy H: Sure, well I think there are two main reasons why the college acquired Montgomery Place. The first is, it was the only contiguous property adjacent to the main campus where the college could expand. And when the property came up for sale, there was concern that there would be incompatible development right next to our very beautiful campus. And so, in a way it was protectionist to preserve the historic property, and to add to possibilities for expansion for the college. And secondly, because Montgomery Place, once you start to dig into it, you can see the infinite amount of resources that are there that would be helpful to enhance our current academic, co-curricular, and public programs. So, we have been very actively making use of all of those resources in a variety of ways.

3:57 Mackie: And actually, just another follow-up question, one of the other resources that we use a lot is the Sawkill River, for research, so we do have a river right on campus. Is that on the main campus side of the line separating this campus from Montgomery Place, or is that originally part of Montgomery Place?

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4:14 Amy H: Well, that's not an easy answer, because originally, when Janet Montgomery purchased the property, she didn't have rights to the Sawkill, it belonged to private owners. Over time, heirs purchased more property, and it became part of Montgomery Place. But as of today, the Sawkill is the boundary line between Bard's main campus and the Montgomery Place campus.

4:46 Mackie: Got it.

4:47 Josh: So, how has Bard integrate Montgomery Place into the college, and how can students be more involved with that particular campus?

4:56 Amy H: Well, we in the last three and a half years that we have owned the property, have taken various initiatives, both academic and co-curricular, to enhance the students' experience of being here at Bard. Some examples that I can point to are in the Language and Thinking program, L&T, students often come over, and as part of their introduction to the campus and their introduction to their studies in that program, they'll get a tour of Montgomery Place. We have several one-off programs that are given. For example, the Physics Department annually gives astronomy program at night. Probably most impactful are several courses that have been taught in and around Montgomery Place, about the property. Myra Armstead has taught two of them, she can talk a little bit more about those classes. We do present concerts, lectures... we hold a salon series that's open to the public. We do lots of public programs by the way, that are open not only to the students and the community at Bard, but to the larger community. They also with this salon series is a lecture program that focuses on topics that are relevant to the property, but also relevant today. The Environmental and Urban Studies program has also made use of all of the natural resources on the property, of which there are many, to enhance their teaching as well. So, I'm going to throw it over to Myra to talk about the Engaged Liberal Arts and Sciences programs, and her two courses that she has taught.

6:50 Myra: The Engaged Liberal Arts and Sciences program is a curricular initiative that is run by the Center for Civic Engagement at Bard. Montgomery Place offers a unique opportunity to offer courses within that curriculum. Bard, as the owner of the property, is in a unique position as an educational institution, to participate in the revised interpretation of historic sites that's going on nationally. This is a very live issue in the country as a whole, but particularly for the Hudson Valley, because the Hudson Valley, in the colonial period, existed as a slave society. Most of these estates that developed, were in fact, northern plantations. This is something that historians have known, within the field, for decades. But now, there is more energy and commitment to bringing this history to life to the public. So, the ELAS courses that I've been involved in have sought to uncover this history, involve the students in discovering this history and bringing it to the public through exhibits, and other ways. Also, there are seniors who have been interested in Montgomery Place and have produced some outstanding projects. One of the most interesting one's last year was done in Digital Humanities, or the Experimental Humanities program, where a student recreated, or created, this 3D experience of Cedar Hill, and Annandale, which were the towns...that's where Montgomery Place sits, within the larger town of Red Hook. So, she literally studied the architectural renderings, maps, histories of labor, and actually was able to produce this very persuasive 3D experience.

9:12 Mackie: Cool. That sounds really interesting!

9:13 Josh: Fantastic.

9:14 Mackie: And with, having this property for three? Four?

9:19 Helene: Three and a half years.

9:20 Mackie: Three and a half years, obviously comes a responsibility to care for it. I'm wondering, Helene, if you could talk a little bit about the action that's been taking place over the last couple of years to preserve the history of Montgomery Place.

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9:38 Helene: We like to say that preservation goes hand in hand with access. So, we've been working to both inventory and create finding aids to the collections of Montgomery Place, both the archival collections and the physical collections, as well as this extensive Livingston Library that came with the house. We have books from Edward Livingston, the second owner who was an advocate of the abolition of the death penalty, so we have his law library. We have Violetta's gardening books and her gardening design books. We have Cora's garden catalogues from the 19th century when she was AJ Downing and AJ Davis to help construct the landscape. So, we have these materials, and we are permitted to really make them available to not only the students, but also to the larger historical community, and scholars as well.

10:51 Mackie: And students can be involved in that process, or have been?

10:54 Helene: We typically work with a couple of students a semester, both in the house and in the archives. But, of course we also make the materials available to classes. We ship things over and we make things available to classes in the library when they are needed.

11:14 Mackie: Amazing. Amazing collection of things.

11:16 Amy H: Can I add to what Helen just said? I don't know if it's clear, but with the acquisition of the property came 8,000+ objects that have been in the family since the beginning of the first Livingston heir that lived there. In addition, there are countless documents and correspondence and letters that are not physical collections, but as Helene said, part of the archives that we are working on inventorying and making available to the Bard community and the public for research purposes.

11:59 Myra: I'd like to add another point, that because the owners of these estates were what I call an interlocking directorate – they married each other, they kept the money in-house, so to speak – Bard has been mentioned to me, several times, in my research upstate on the Schuyler Estate. Everybody's interested in the Schuylers now, because of the popularity of Hamilton, and just last week I was doing research and someone mentioned the archives at Bard, the Livingston archives at Bard, the Montgomery Archives at Bard, and how our work is contributing to the interpretation of those estates as well. The holdings are just vast.

12:55 Helene: As well, that's sort of the history through documents and books and things, but the college obviously is also preserving the history by, I mean Buildings and Grounds has done a fantastic job of maintaining the estate itself, and fixing the buildings, and restoring the gardens, which I hope Amy will say more about, but that's also part of the process of preserving the history.

13:22 Mackie: Right, it's not just the physical buildings and objects themselves, but the immense amount of space, actually, between them. That does segue nicely into the next question, which is about the landscape, if you want to talk a little bit about that.

13:38 Amy P: Sure, well since we were just speaking about the archives, I think of the landscape as a type of living archive. Something that definitely has not been as well documented throughout history, and in physical archives, but somewhat in the photographs. We have some documentation of plantings that they had done, including the gardener, and the slaves that used to garden in those spaces, which is fantastic to help us recreate some of these spaces. We'd like to, and are working toward this every day, to create the gardens and as accurate plantings as we can. We do have a list from Violetta Delafield, one of the owners, in the 20s, 30s, and 40s, we'd like to use her planting list, because that's many of the gardens that remain, are from her time period, and so we're trying to do so as best we can. That's how we're working on it. But the gardens in whole are part of the 380-acre estate, that actually does include more than just the grounds and the gardens, it includes a 1929 Hitchings and Company Greenhouse, which we have recently renovated with some upgrades – automated venting system, an energy efficient heating system, which is great – and then we also have miles of hiking trails on the property, we have an arboretum from 1846 that was developed by one of the owners there, Thomas Barton, and Cora Livingston. It's only a fragment of what once was but we really hope to expand and learn from that arboretum, and incorporate it into our existing arboretum on campus, and offer that as knowledge to students, and start to label some of the plantings over there and the trees over there. The farm over there is a 60, 70-acre working farm, that two farmers from the last 30 years have been taking care of. In fact, that farm, which is a heritage fruit, apple, peach, plum, everything you can think of, farm and orchard, operates a farm stand out on 9G and has actually been running through the whole extent of the 200+ year history of the estate. They've always been operating that farm to some extent, and Bard continues to do so.

16:00 Helene: The core of which, the farm stand of course, was Violetta's wayside stand that she designed and exhibited at the county fair which won a prize.

16:10 Amy P: That's right, and they just built out on the existing historic structure.

16:13 Mackie: Got it.

16:13 Amy P: Right, exactly. The main thing I wanted to say was that Montgomery Place is very rich. It has a very rich horticultural history, and something that I would love to in the future develop, and expand, and interpret more, for visitors, because it is interpreted, we have a few signs in the landscape, but to have more active docents going around, and more active stationed docents perhaps, talking about the landscape and interpreting it for folks and visitors, and I think that that would go a long way to helping people enjoy the space. And just using the space, it's a magical space that many people have called very spirited, in fact we have an old growth forest woods on the property, and our south woods, that I'd really like to see turned into a preserve. A wildlife sanctuary of sorts, and it's just a place that people go, and you just feel restful and solitude and meditation as soon as you get there. It's something that I think could be preserved in that sense, just a restful place.

17:23 Mackie: Even before we acquired it, I remember running around Montgomery Place with the cross-country team, and it's pretty wonderful out there.

17:32 Amy P: Yeah, the trails are great.

17:33 Amy H: Can I just add one more thing that we haven't talked about why this property is so special, is that the preeminent 19th century architect and landscape designer, who was really considered the father of American landscape design, both worked at the same time at Montgomery Place. We are extraordinarily lucky that we have four buildings that were designed by AJ Davis, who again was the Frank Lloyd Wright of his time, still in excellent condition, and have been preserved at Montgomery Place. The grounds themselves were helped – the design of the grounds, AJ Downing was also a major, major influence. Those are two very important reasons why the property itself is a national historic landmark, which is the highest designation of historic properties that you can get. There are only 2,500 historic landmarks in the entire United States, and we are one of those 2,500.

18:46 Mackie: That's very exciting. That's very cool to have that.

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18:48 Josh: We hope you've been enjoying our discussion so far, and we return to our podcast. Our panel will be discussing the future of Montgomery Place, enjoy!

18:58 Myra: The sky's the limit! I have lots of ideas. We of course want to develop more courses, and more co-curricular courses in the future. I think one area might be something I'm calling the French connection, because Edward Livingston, Janet Livingston Montgomery's heir, spent time in New Orleans. He married a woman who was of French descent, a refugee from Haiti, after the Haitian Revolution, and so there are all of these connections in terms of French design. He became an ambassador to France, there were slaves that Louisa, his wife, brought with her, were they from Haiti, we don't know. There are all sorts of ways of looking at this. Edward Livingston also is noted for having developed a legal code for Louisiana from the French system. There are courses in political science that could be developed, certainly courses in art history, et cetera. Each of these could have an Engaged Liberal Arts and Sciences component. We're developing a tour script, an official tour script, we're beginning to work towards that. That's a work in the future. Students have all sorts of interests in interpreting this site, I've heard suggestions from living history, students in theater could develop senior projects. There is the burial site, or the purported burial site, the suspected burial site for slaves that we need to investigate more. More collaborations with local historical societies, Historic Red Hook was a fabulous partner for us this past year in bringing an exhibit to light. And I know that Environmental and Urban Studies has all sorts of plans and wishes for using the site for experimentation and to shed light on issues of water, water preservation, land issues, so those are just some possibilities.

21:42 Amy H: I also see us continuing our exhibition program, both digital and physical. We have documented our past exhibits and have created new ones in the digital format that are all on the website where people can see if they can get a sense of what we've been doing. I would also like to see us continue our program of public programs, not only to be open to the Bard community, but to the general public that have come in droves, sometimes. Most of our programs have been sold out, which has been terrific. There seems to be a great interest in what's happening at Montgomery Place, and I also see this year coming with a possible writing of a larger strategic plan for both the college and the property in how we really look deeper into the future of where we want to go with the property. So, there's lots to do and lots to look forward to.

22:42 Mackie: Yeah! Lots happening, and lots more to consider and to put in motion. Well, thank you all for joining us, this has been a great moment to come together with lots of experts in the room, so we really appreciate your taking the time. And for those of you who are really interested in the Place, please come visit us and visit Montgomery Place if you want to. You could certainly speak with us and we can answer any questions you have about Montgomery Place and of course, as always, about anything to do with Bard College and with admission. And if you are interested in sending us questions, you can reach us at admission@bard.edu. You can also check us out on the website and look for Montgomery Place information there as well. So, take a listen to our upcoming podcasts, we're going to be producing a lot more. Thanks for listening!

23:28 Josh: Thanks everybody! Take care.