

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MERYL GORDON

BUNNY
MELLON

The LIFE *of an* AMERICAN
STYLE LEGEND



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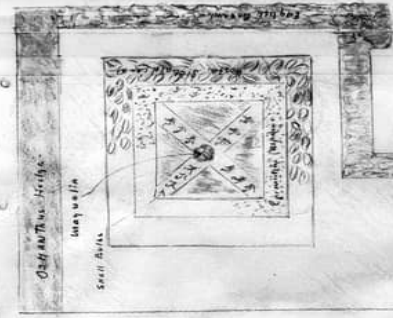
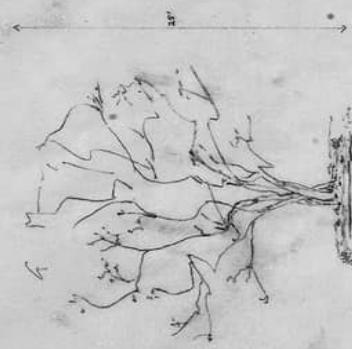
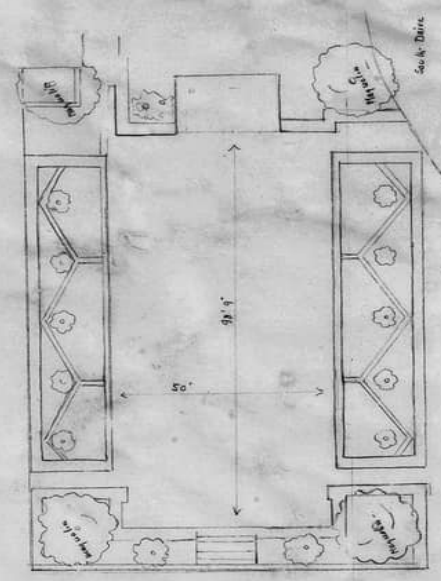
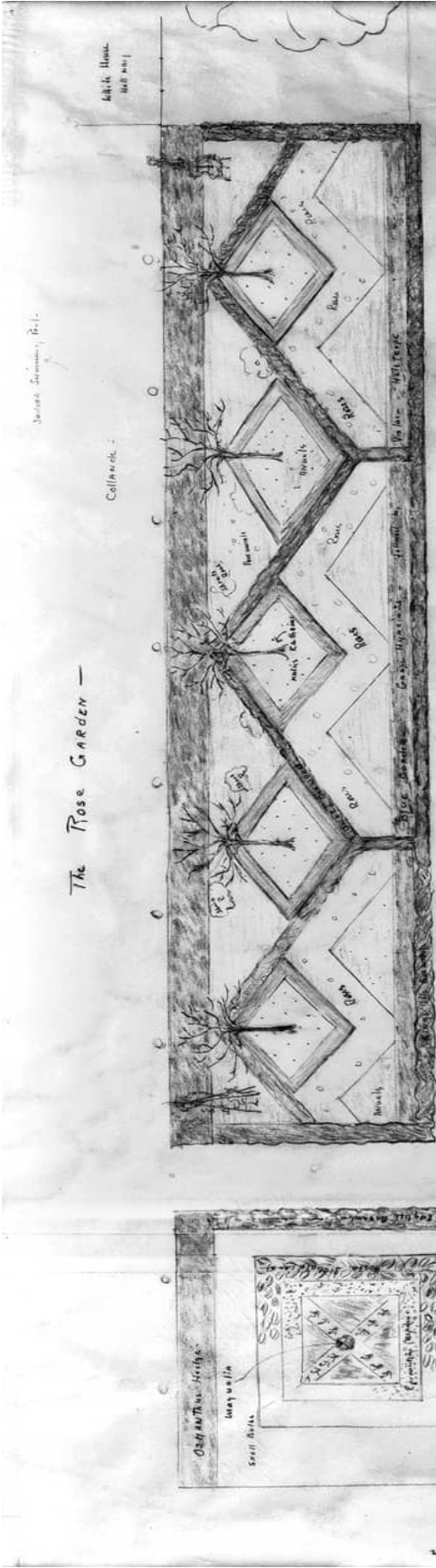
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President's Oval Office

Cabinet Room

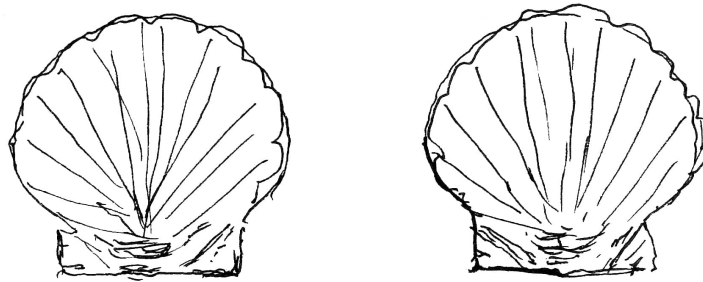
Arch. & Landscape Dr. Inc.

Proposed Plan for President Kennedy 1962

*To Walter
Time After Time*

Chapter One

President Kennedy Has a Request



Bunny Mellon would always remember where she was—and how she felt—when she got the phone call that transformed her life. The year was 1961, and on that sunny August morning, Bunny was sitting in her four-poster bed at her summer home on the privately owned island of Oyster Harbors in Cape Cod, gazing at the water and looking forward to the day ahead.

The estate that she shared with her second husband, Paul Mellon, the heir to the Pittsburgh banking and oil fortune, served as an impressive showcase for the couple's passions. As president of the National Gallery, Paul consumed art, buying troves of paintings by British artists (Stubbs, Turner); Impressionists (Renoir, Degas, Cézanne, Monet); and American artists (Sargent, Homer). The Cape Cod house had such a deceptively cozy money-whispers ambience—wooden ship models, antique duck decoys, quilts on the beds—that visitors were often startled to see the masterpieces

on the walls.

An ardent gardener, Bunny had tamed the property with so many cultivated plots of flower beds and vegetables that it took nine employees to tend them. Walking amid the colorful landscape, Paul would indulgently joke with the gardeners, “Is this one of my \$1,000 tomatoes?”

His wife had fallen in love with flowers as a child, drawn to the gardens and fields of wildflowers at her wealthy family’s properties, which included beachfront rentals in the Hamptons, a New Hampshire farm, and a sprawling two-hundred-acre estate in Princeton, New Jersey. Bunny’s paternal grandfather had licensed and named Listerine, and her advertising genius father, Gerard Lambert, popularized the antiseptic as the cure to the social malady that he invented, halitosis. Born in 1910, the oldest of three children, Bunny found refuge in nature from a household with bickering parents, hovering servants, and an excruciating sibling rivalry with her gorgeous younger sister. Bunny read her father’s gardening books and was given her own land to tend. “I always had a garden,” she recalled, “first a very small square with an enormous sundial that I had spent all my allowance on.”

Now, at age fifty-one, slender and perfectly groomed, Bunny reveled in creating magnificent outdoor landscapes and unusual floral arrangements. Her Cape Cod property paled in comparison to the couple’s full-time residence, a nearly five-thousand-acre Virginia horse farm with football-field-sized gardens and gigantic greenhouses filled with exotic plants. “The greenhouses went on and on and on,” says Lee Radziwill, the younger sister of Jackie Kennedy. “Flowers from Sicily, flowers from South America, she sent her top gardener everywhere, she told me.”

Bunny prowled the grounds at her homes in couture Balenciaga gardening clothes, pruning shears in hand. She knew the Latin names of flowers and plants and collected rare books on horticulture. On Cape Cod, she banned the local hardy favorite, hydrangea, in favor of blue salvia, achillea, and sweet peas. Paul Mellon would later admiringly say of his wife, “The thing I envy about Bunny is that from the age of five or six, her entire life has been

occupied by horticulture, by one consuming thing.”

Described in society columns as a style-setter, she embraced such discreet I’m-so-rich-I-don’t-have-to-flaunt-it trends as wearing a gabardine coat lined with mink and customizing her Christian Dior handbags with gold Schlumberger clasps and a hidden gold monogram. Bunny could slip into couture gowns and adorn herself with formidable jewelry—Schlumberger, Verdura, Van Cleef & Arpels, Tiffany’s—to play the perfect hostess. Just a few years earlier, she and Paul had entertained the Queen of England and Prince Philip at the farm.

Yet she was happiest outdoors, gardening or sketching. In her journals and letters, she wrote lyrically about the fragile opening of a flower petal, seeing the dew at dawn and the change of seasons. In a typical note to her daughter, Eliza, Bunny included a whimsical sketch of wildflowers stretching upward, with a description: “This is how I feel the flowers feel on the first day of summer. It is hot and the air is filled with insect songs. The day stays light and the colors come together like a summer mist.”

She savored imperfect perfection. At her behest, trees were pruned into rounded shapes, yet she wanted her grounds to reflect the seasons. Woe to the gardener who raked up apples lying on the ground. The errant staffer was ordered to empty the barrels and put the fruit back. The flagstones on her Cape Cod garden terrace were spaced to allow weeds to artfully spring up. “On any of her properties, anything you’d see would be perfect but it wouldn’t seem manipulated, it would seem natural,” says Sam Kasten, a master weaver who produced fabrics for the Mellons’ homes. Bunny wanted to exert control over her environment yet give the illusion that everything was effortless. Her favorite saying was: “Nothing should be noticed.”

Bunny started her mornings on Cape Cod with breakfast in bed delivered by her maid, with a typical menu of coffee, a poached egg, and kedgeriee (an Anglo-Indian dish, made from fresh fish caught by her staff off her dock). Even the trays were pleasing to the eye: Her carpenters had crafted butterfly-shaped wooden trays, at her instruction, and each morning a freshly plucked wildflower was placed in a tiny inkwell as decoration. “Her tray had to be

perfect,” says Linda Evora, one of many generations of Cape Cod housekeepers. “We used silver and good china. If she ate in her room at night, she wanted a red rose on her tray, she asked for other flowers earlier in the day.”

Bunny would linger in her second-floor bedroom, looking at the enticing view: the sailboats traversing the saltwater Seapuit River, the sandy sliver of Dead Neck Island, an uninhabited pristine barrier island owned by the Mellons, and beyond, the Atlantic Ocean. She enjoyed the morning quiet, a time to read the newspapers, write letters, plan menus, or just daydream. Bunny and her husband had adjoining rooms—and, some gossiped, adjoining lives—and while the couple usually shared lunch and dinner, Paul was an early riser and they ate breakfast apart.

Bunny had divorced her first husband, country newspaper publisher Stacy Lloyd Jr., with whom she had two children, to marry the widowed Paul Mellon in 1948. The son of Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, Paul had been ranked by *Fortune* magazine in 1957 as the fifth-wealthiest man in America. A horse-breeding and racing aficionado, a reserved gentleman with a wry sense of humor, Paul had spent years in analysis to deal with the debris from his wrenching childhood and his parents’ bitter divorce. (Able to afford the best, he was analyzed by Carl Jung and consulted Anna Freud.)

Paul had been in the public eye his entire life. As a student at Yale, when he turned down an invitation to the secret society Skull and Bones to join rival Scroll and Key instead, this momentous decision merited an article in the *New York Herald Tribune*. Paul Mellon was a great catch, but he was also an introspective and moody man who had learned to deflect emotions behind a facade of good manners.

At Cape Cod, the couple had a daily routine: Bunny went sailing in the morning with local boatbuilder Chet Crosby while Paul would test the waters in the afternoon in his own boat, also accompanied by Crosby. Paul’s horses frequently raced at Saratoga during the summer, and he would fly up on his private plane for an afternoon at the races.

Bunny’s reverie on that August morning in 1961 was broken by the sound

of excited conversation and laughter coming from the industrial-sized kitchen on the ground floor. The staff was keyed up since special guests were coming for lunch: President John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jackie. This was not the first time that Bunny's cook had made corn soup for JFK—in fact, he would often request it in advance—but each occasion was memorable in this heady first year of the Kennedy administration.

Just four years earlier, a mutual friend had introduced Bunny to Jackie Kennedy. Even though Bunny was nineteen years older than Jackie—and only four years younger than Jackie's formidable mother, Janet Auchincloss—the two women bonded as if they were contemporaries, each thrilled to have found a trustworthy confidante. Asked whether Bunny was like a best friend, sister, or mother to Jackie, Lee Radziwill replied “More sister.”

Bunny and Jackie both loved art and fashion and ballet and all things French. They could tease each other and tell each other the truth. “God, you can't imagine what a funny girl, she would make you laugh,” Bunny later said of Jackie. “She's very, very bright.” In the seven months since the Kennedys had been in residence at the White House, Bunny had been a frequent visitor, advising Jackie on redecorating the white elephant of a mansion and arranging flowers for state dinners.

For seven weekends during the summer of 1961, the president and Jackie had escaped Washington for his father's compound in Hyannis Port. The couple and their toddlers, Caroline and John Jr.—accompanied by the Secret Service—would frequently take the family motorboat, the *Marlin*, to cruise the short distance to the Mellon estate for swimming, sailing, and lunch.

This was a fraught summer for the new president as he grappled with a Cold War crisis. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev was belligerently threatening to upend the postwar status quo in Europe by dividing Berlin in half with a barbed-wire fence. Reporters staked out the Kennedys' Cape Cod estate, anxiously noting which advisers had come to brief the president. Determined to be perceived as confident and unflinching, President Kennedy decided on Sunday, August 13, to carry on with such carefree activities as sailing and going to lunch at the Mellons' rather than flying back

to Washington.

Bunny had the amenities at hand for a formal meal: delicate china, monogrammed silver, and the large dining room table that had once held pride of place on her father's racing yacht, the *Atlantic*. But what she thought would please the president instead was a simple picnic at her modest beach house, an open-air shack on the water with a small kitchen and a wooden-lattice-covered deck furnished with wicker chairs.

That morning, she was reviewing her plans for the lunch when the phone rang. Jackie Kennedy was on the line and confided in a rushed conversation about her husband's new idea. "Jack's going to ask you to do something for him, promise me that you will do it," she told Bunny. "He wants you to design a garden for him at the White House."

"Where?" Bunny asked.

"Outside his office."

As Bunny later recalled, "She was breathless and in a hurry. Before I could answer, she had hung up."

The request from the president was simultaneously unnerving and exhilarating. Bunny projected aloof self-confidence but she was, at the core, deeply insecure. She had longed to attend college but her autocratic father had turned her down, urging her to focus instead on finding a suitable husband. She compensated by becoming voraciously well-read.

She had spent her life in the shadow of two famous and accomplished men, her father and her husband, and lately she had become known as the woman standing beside Jackie Kennedy. Here was Bunny's chance to step into the spotlight and do something that would, indeed, be noticed.

"I was sitting in my bed looking out at the sea. How could I cope with a garden of this size?" she wrote in an unpublished reminiscence. "Technical things like drains, water pipes, etc. must be considered and drawings made... I had never had any formal schooling in landscape design, which would have helped now."

She worried that she wasn't up to it—but of course, she had to do it. She roused herself with thoughts of her maternal grandfather, Arthur Lowe, a