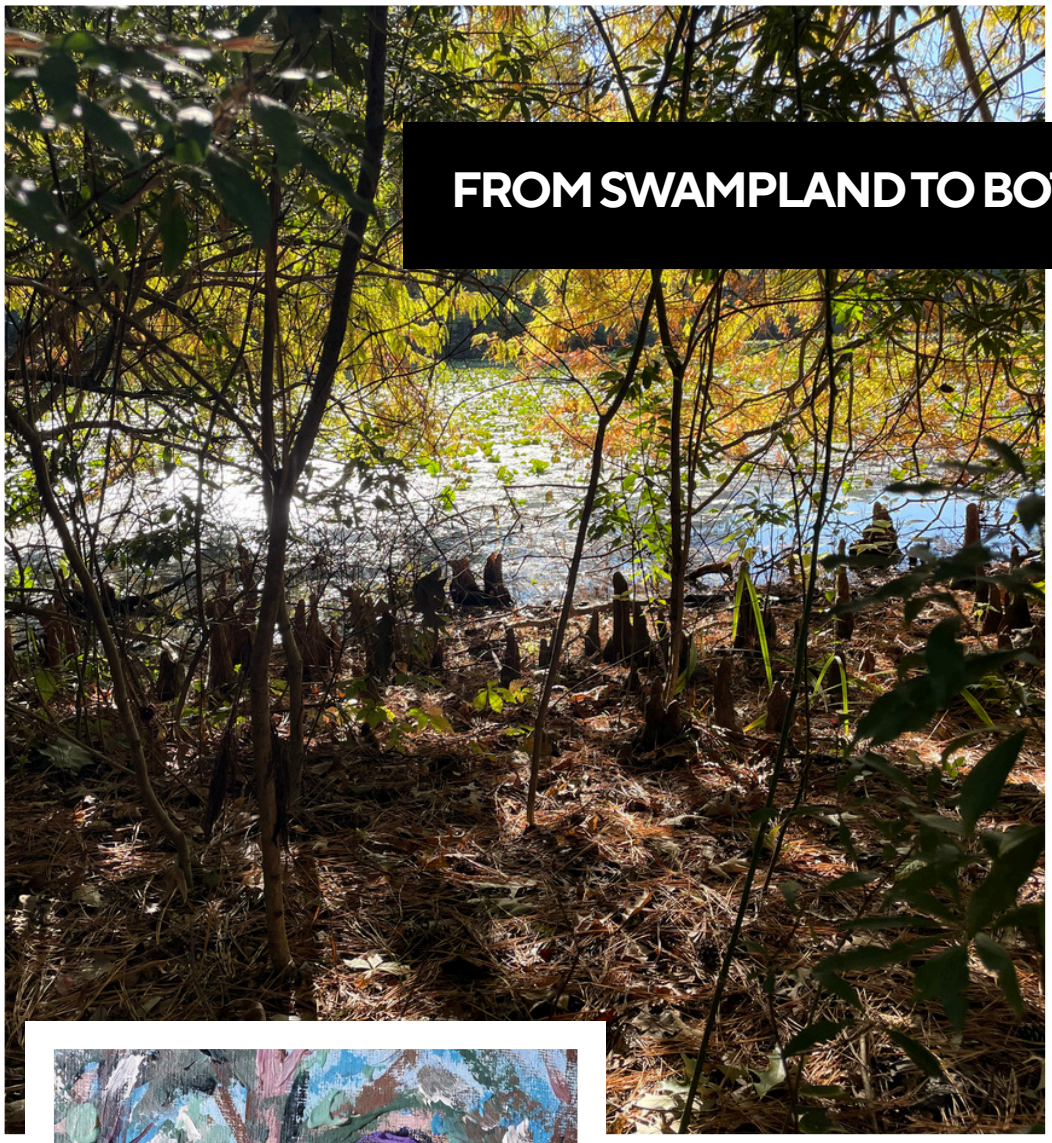
THE HANDS THAT BUILT THE GARDEN

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Norfolk Botanical Garden



PHOTOS & TEXT BY: CRAIG L. JERMIN

FROM SWAMPLAND TO BOTANICAL GARDEN



Swampland at Norfolk Botanical Garden today, similar to the land the WPA workers cleared. Photo by Craig Jermin.



In 1938, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired 200 African American women and 20 African American men to transform 25 acres of swampland into what would become the Norfolk Botanical Garden.

Earning 25 cents an hour and working with shovels, buckets and wheelbarrows, they cleared dense vegetation, moved more than 125 truckloads of soil, and planted 4,000 azaleas, 2,000 rhododendrons and 100 bushels of daffodils in about six months, laying the foundation for one of Norfolk's most treasured landmarks.

Untitled (2014) by Daniel Kathalynas, Artist in Residence. Photo by Craig Jermin.



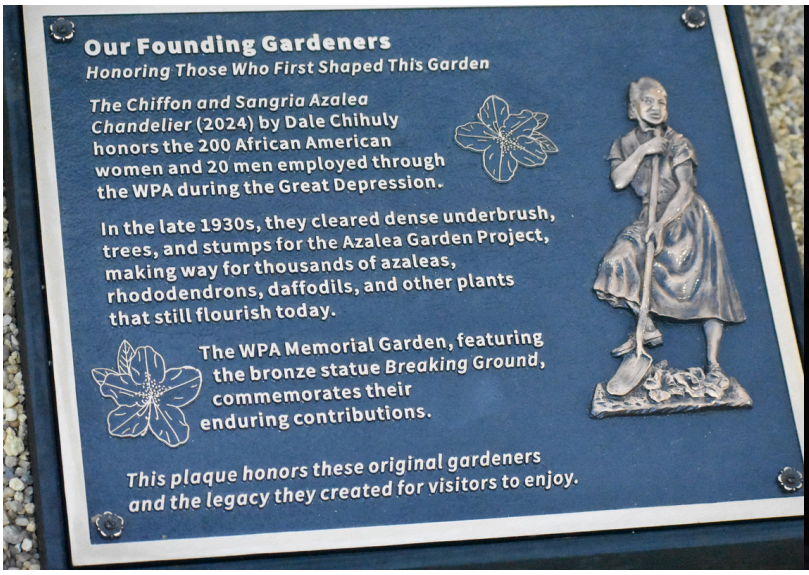
WPA Workers at Norfolk Azalea Garden, circa 1938
African American WPA workers clearing land for what would become Norfolk Botanical Garden in Norfolk, Virginia.

Photo credit: Norfolk Botanical Garden. Original photographer unconfirmed.



WPA Workers at Norfolk Azalea Garden, circa 1938
African American WPA workers gathering in Norfolk, Virginia.

Photo credit: Norfolk Botanical Garden. Original photographer unconfirmed.

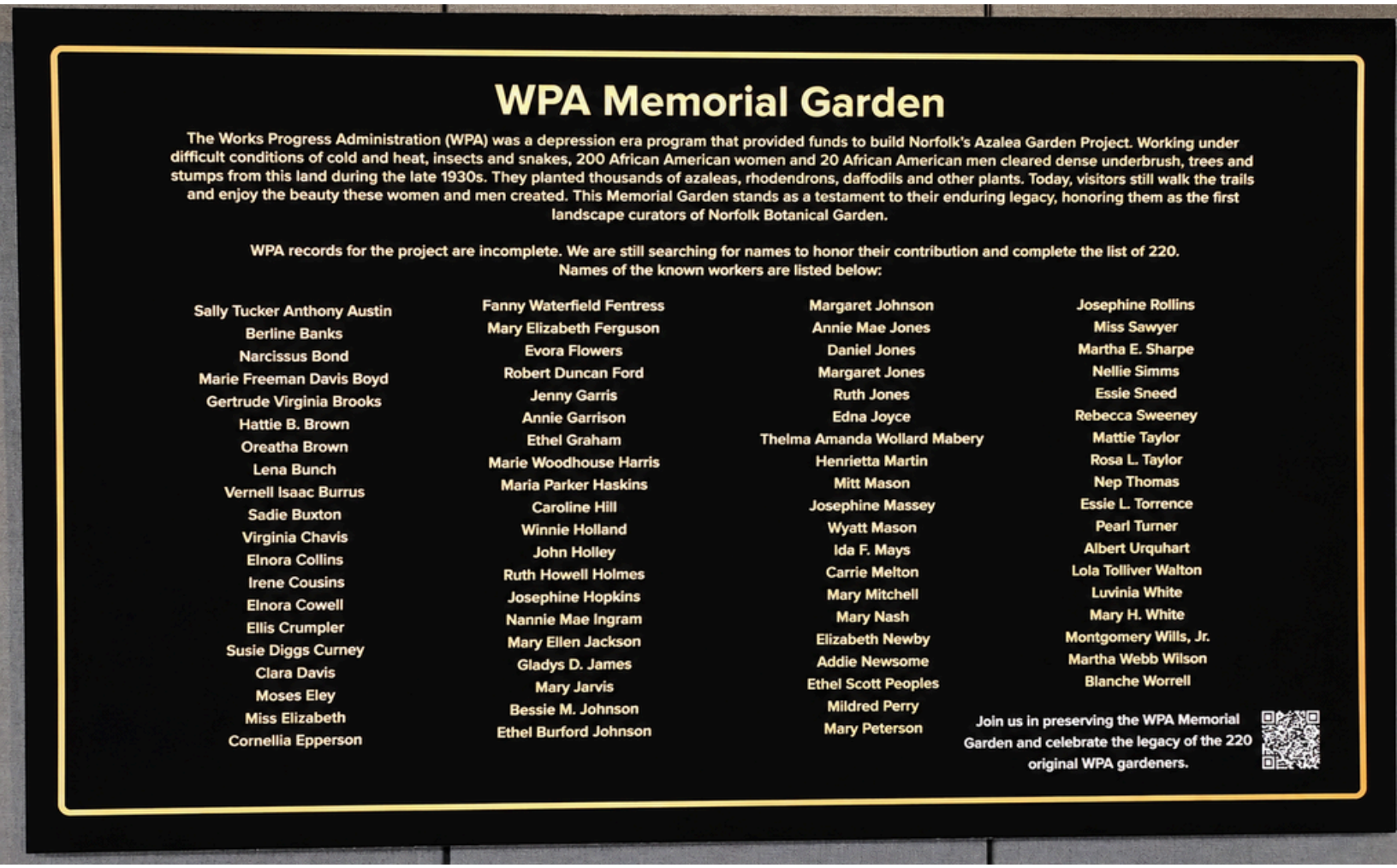




RECLAIMING THEIR NAMES

Dr. Martha McClenny Williams, historian, author and former Norfolk Botanical Garden board member, shows a book about the WPA gardeners and the census records she used to identify some of them. Video stills by Craig Jermin, November 2026.

The WPA Memorial Garden plaque lists the 78 workers identified so far. The garden is still searching for the remaining names. Photo by Craig Jermin. November 2026



ARTISTIC TRIBUTES

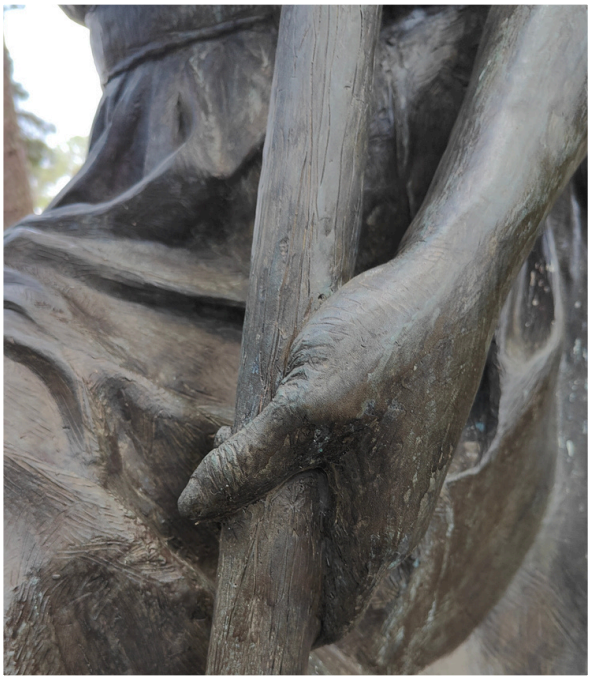


The *Garden Club – WPA* (2021) by Maizelle Brown. The painting hangs in the Baker Hall Visitor Center. Photo by Craig Jermin.



The Chiffon and Sangria Azalea Chandelier (2024) by Dale Chihuly, a nod to the azaleas the WPA workers first planted. Photo by Craig Jermin.







Breaking Ground (2009) by Kathleen Farrell. The 8-foot bronze was modeled on photos of the real WPA workers. At its base is an excerpt from “The Garden,” a poem by Gracie Anthony, daughter of original worker Josephine Hopkins. Photos by Craig Jermin.

Nearly 500,000 people walk the Norfolk Botanical Garden and its Azalea Gardens each year. Few know who cleared them. More than 85 years later, 142 of the 220 original gardeners remain unnamed. Every azalea here is their work, and their names belong beside it. If you believe a family member was among the original WPA workers, Norfolk Botanical Garden asks you to contact the garden.



BEHIND THE LENS

Craig Jermin is a senior studying journalism at Hampton University. For his capstone project, he spent weeks at Norfolk Botanical Garden documenting the story of the 220 WPA workers who built it. He interviewed historian Dr. Martha Williams, along with Barbara Rice, Kelly Welsh, Theresa Augustin and Clenise Platt.





