

## THE OAKDALE CAMELLIAS

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**W**ILMINGTON, in Southeastern North Carolina, has long been famous for its gardens. Among those featuring camellias is Orton Plantation with its stately white mansion and colorful past. Much has been written about Airlie Gardens and its fresh-water lakes, dotted with black and white swans and bordered by bright-hued azaleas and camellias. Pleasant Oaks Plantation has a notable collection of new camellias planted among its ancient, spreading oaks. Municipally owned Greenfield Park and Lake is a year round *place of beauty* with many fine camellia specimens. The gardens and greenhouses of Mr. S. L. Marbury are known to camellia enthusiasts throughout the country. *Here you will find all the old varieties as well as practically all the newer ones.* Also you will see greenhouse culture at its best. Phases of camellia culture, from the handling of seedlings to grafting, which most camellia growers believe to be seasonal activities, are going on the entire year. There is one beauty spot in Wilmington which few outsiders know about but which has been long cherished by Wilmington's camellia lovers. This is Oakdale Cemetery.

In 1852 Oakdale Cemetery was started on a one hundred acre plot described in old records as "A neck of land on Burnt Mill Creek where nature seems to have molded the ground for a natural garden and left it for man to beautify." Scattered throughout the property may be found hundreds of camellia plants, a number of which were set out by the earlier residents of Wilmington when the cemetery was opened. It is reasonable to assume that some of the bushes were fairly large at that time. Some of these plants were brought in by steamers sailing from European ports and others were brought in by ships plying their trade up and down the Atlantic Coast. From the North came hothouse camellias in tubs which could be set out immediately in this climate, made mild the year around by the near-by Gulf Stream. From Charleston and Savannah and New Orleans came new varieties. Many of the residents of Wilmington a hundred years ago lived on small city lots

with no room for gardens, and they naturally took their plants to the cemetery to beautify family grounds.

One of the largest plants to be found in Oakdale is the "Munds Camellia" as it is locally known. It has a double, light pink, medium size flower which blooms in midseason and is not unlike Brooklynia (Orton Pink), but much lighter in color. It was planted in 1860 by Mr. James Cassidey, great-grandfather of the present owners, Misses Columbia and Elsa Munds, and is thought to have been brought from Maine some years prior to this date. It is growing on a rather high plot of land which makes good drainage but the plant gets very little water during the year except during periods of rainy weather, which is not sufficient to fill the requirements of a plant of this size. It is exposed to direct sunlight all through the day. The bush is about sixteen feet high and spreads on one side approximately twenty-six feet from the main trunk. The plant has not been given the care and attention needed in past years. It is overrun with Spanish moss and wild grapevines which should be removed, and it should also be given a thorough spraying and pruning. (See Fig. 32.)



Fig. 32. The "Munds Camellia" planted in the Oakdale Cemetery in 1860

Across from this plant and on the same large lot is another big camellia which was planted at the same time by Mr. Cassidey. It is equally as large but not as healthy as the Munds camellia. The flowers are single, in color a true bright red, and small with long yellow stamens.

Growing not too far from these two plants is a tremendous Herme camellia. This bush was planted on the Boatwright lot in 1911 when the plant was about two feet high. (It is thought that this plant was purchased locally.) It is growing under a large live oak tree which is draped in moss. The plant gets the benefit of the morning sun but is covered with poison ivy, Virginia creeper, Spanish moss, and English ivy. Much of this growth had to be cleared away to get the accompanying picture (see Fig. 33). This camellia blooms beautifully each year and never, even in severe winters, fails to have hundreds of large blooms. Many sports have been found on this plant, including solid pinks, light colored pinks with stripes, and many other variations. It is the parent of many of the Herme plants growing here in Wilmington. This camellia was planted in a filled in section containing much clay, which is not a normal condition here, but it has thrived very well in this soil.

One of the showiest camellias in Oakdale is a strain of the variety Gigantea, known as "Gaiety," growing on the Hanby lot. In 1905 Mrs. John R. Hanby purchased this bush locally and planted it in its present location. Shortly afterwards, that part of the cemetery was washed away so badly that a retaining wall had to be placed around the plot (see Fig. 34). Oddly enough, this plant grows on and on, even though its root system is limited to only one side. It stands a good eight feet high and each season has always come through with bright peony-formed flowers of red with white variegation. It blooms midseason to late.

One of the favorites over the years in Oakdale is the Elegans Variegated in the Woolvin section. This camellia is not a shrub but a tree with five large branches growing from one trunk, which rises about a foot out of the ground before the branches break. The tree is about fourteen feet high and blooms profusely in season. Originally, the office building of Oakdale stood not many yards from this tree, and for many years it was closely observed by the bookkeeper for Oakdale, Mrs. W. H. Smith. She recalls that this *Chandlerii* has bloomed profusely every year, the flowers being large and uniform. It is believed that this particular plant has



Fig. 33. The Herme camellia planted on the Boatwright lot in 1911

never been known to sport. The flowers are bright crimson, splashed white and distinctly anemone in form. This tree first grew in the city but was transplanted about 1895 to its present location in the Woolvin section. Descendants of the Woolvin family remember their grandmother telling of the then small plant when she was a young girl. It would be interesting to know just how old this tree is and where it originally came from, but its history has been lost. The tree remains, though, with white colored bark



*Courtesy of McCaskill Gardens*

CAMELIA HIEMALIS • BILL WYLAM

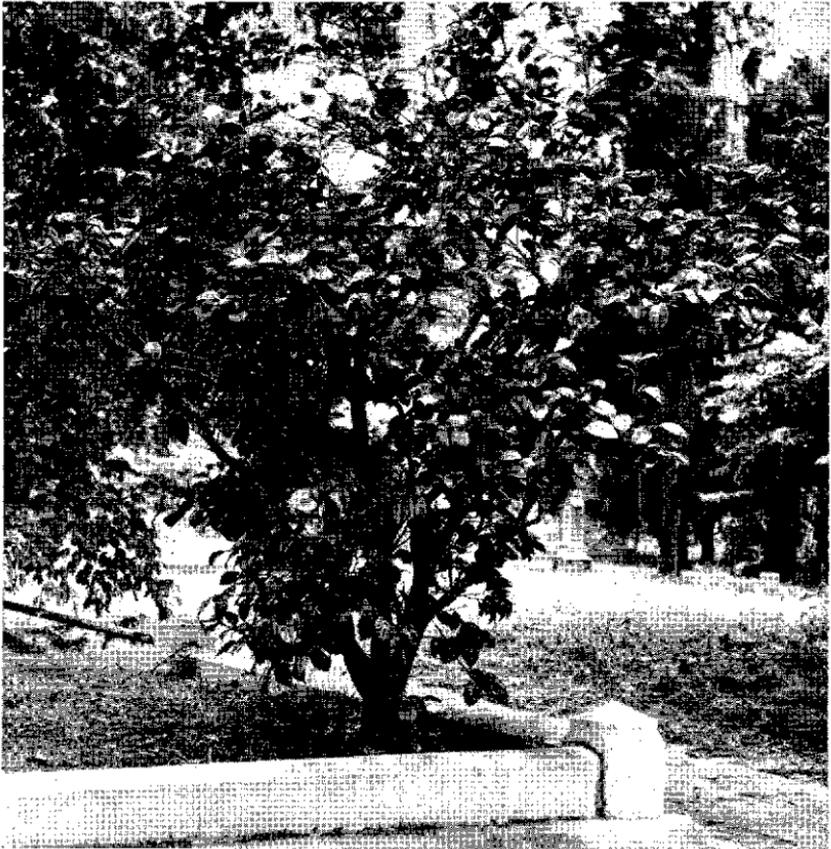


Fig. 34. One of the showiest camellias in the Oakdale Cemetery is the Gaiety (a strain of Gigantca) planted by Mrs. John B. Hanby in 1905.

on the trunks, and glossy, dark green leaves. It does need pruning and spraying as it has much dead wood (see Fig. 35).

Near-by is an excellent specimen of *Elegans Variegated* (*Chandleri*). It is planted on a hill exposed to full sun all day, has poor drainage, and gets only rain water. It is not on anyone's lot and is thought by many to have been planted there when that section of the cemetery was being beautified by donations of plants. The plant stands about ten feet high, is bushy and clean and has many flowers. It is very much admired and many a "slip" has been taken from this bush.

On top of this hill grow two interesting plants. Both are single flowered, one red and one white, and they grow together, forming

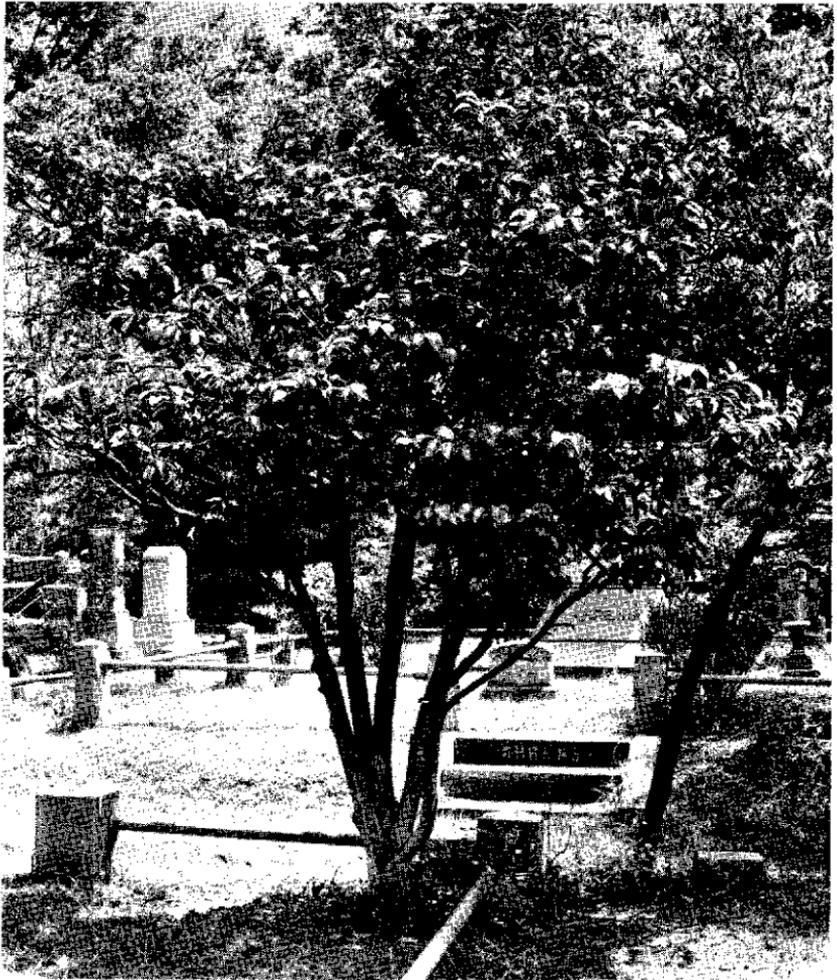


Fig. 35. The age of this Elegans Var. in the Woolvin section of the Cemetery is not known. It was moved to the present location in 1895.

an arch where they meet at the top. The bushes are very old and each has a single trunk. The flowers have long yellow stamens and bloom at the same time. The plants themselves are rather badly in need of attention and have that look which comes with old age in a camellia plant that has been neglected.

On this same hill in a carefully tended area is planted a beautiful Frau Minna Seidel, better known in this country as Pink Perfection. The name "Frau Minna Seidel" is used here because the owner

of the plant lived in Germany for many years and knew the variety there by that name. She prefers to use the German name. The bush is approximately ten feet high and has a spread of over six feet from the trunk. Each year it has flowers so large that it seems the plant must have been disbudded but it has not. The leaves are large and shining, and it is one of the favorites in Oakdale. It was planted in the early twenties.

There is an ancient Sarah Frost which was planted in 1875 near the old summerhouse and was presented as a gift to the cemetery. It is a fine bushy plant with healthy branches and, except for small flowers, is an excellent specimen. It does get some attention and has been pruned and watered, since it is in a section under constant care. Also near the summer house and standing about fourteen feet high with many low, widespread branches, is a very old bush. It grows in sandy soil and has poor drainage but blooms prolifically with small reddish flowers, rather insignificant but immensely showy when in bloom. Not much is known about the history of this plant but it is thought to have been planted about 1860 and from its looks certainly could be easily that old. Here too is a fine Alba Plena, planted in 1920. It is a strong plant with even growth. The foliage is healthy and dark green in color. This camellia gets good care the year around and is fertilized at the proper time and sprayed when needed. The flowers are very large, flat, and showy, and seldom hurt by cold weather because the plant is protected by a giant oak.

This handsome Alba Plena completes the picture of exceptional plants of the varieties of camellias one would expect to find in an historical old garden spot such as Wilmington's Oakdale Cemetery.