In 1856, Steele Burden's grandparents built the old Windrush House, shown in this photo from around 1918. His parents used the house as a summer retreat until they moved there in 1921.

Rural Life Museum offers glimpse of Louisiana plantation life

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

Follow the narrow two lane road just south of the I-10 exit off I-10 and you'll end up in the 19th century. The road winds through the Burden Research Plantation to the Rural Life Museum, the internationally renowned model plantation created by the late Steele Burden, a self-trained landscape architect who designed the gardens of many of the older homes in the area and landscaped much of the LSU campus and City Park.

"Steele had a way — more of a philosophy of living — that carried over to his landscapes as well as his interiors. He tried to surround himself with beauty," said David Floyd, director of the Rural Life Museum. "We always talk about the atmosphere of this place. That atmosphere is what he created."

The idea of the model plantation may have begun with Burden's desire to preserve one original slave cabin in the formal gardens he created on his family property in the 1920s, '30s and '40s. When Steele was creating landscapes, he was experimenting with the idea of bringing in old items," said Floyd. "If you look at photos of his early landscapes, he used light posts, olive jars and sculpture. He was making a scene. It was landscaping with artifacts as well as plant material."

"Steele always collected things, even as a young man," said Floyd. "Anything that interested him, he wanted."

"And he knew within 10 seconds if it was something he wanted," said Paul Merrill, chairman and president of the Burden Foundation and LSU chancellor from 1970 to 1990. Steele Burden and his sister, Joan Burden, felt that it was important to preserve the heritage of rural Louisiana, so quickly vanishing in the modern world. In 1960, LSU Chancellor Cecil T. Taylor established a committee to study the possibility of creating a museum depicting the state's rural life. The nucleus of the museum was to be Steele Burden's collection of artifacts and antiques acquired over decades. The Rural Life Museum was established on family property donated by the Burden family. "He (Steele Burden) realized that the backside of life of the plantations was disappearing," said Jean Samuel, founder of the docent program at the museum. The Burden property was originally owned by soldiers and statesman Phineas Thomas, leader of the force that captured West Florida from the Spanish in 1819.
Pike, a wealthy landowner, purchased the property from Thomas' descendants. Pike, who had no children, gave the property as a wedding gift to his favorite niece, Emma Gertrude Barbee, at her marriage to John Charles Burden. The young couple named the property "Windrush" after a river in England located near John Charles Burden's birthplace.

Emma Gertrude and John Charles Burden built their Windrush House on the property in 1836. They divided their time between their home in Windrush and their plantation in St. John the Baptist parish, Louisiana. They remained during frequent yellow fever epidemics.

Windrush was inherited by Steele Burden's father, William Pike Burden Sr., who, with his wife, Ollie Steele Burden, moved permanently to their home at Third Street and North Boulevard and only used the plantation for summer vacations.

"My folks moved out here to the old family house when my father lost his health in 1921," Steele Burden told Ed Cullen in a story in the Sunday Advocate Feb. 5, 1995. "To make the place livable, I planted fruit trees and expanded the garden. I'm still a gardener. My hang-up has always been sculpture, and I've always liked pleasant surroundings."

The Burden family plantation, now in the heart of the city, was preserved intact through the efforts of the Burden Foundation created in 1961 by Steele Burden; his brother, W. Pike Burden; and sister, Jone Burden. The foundation donated the property for charitable and educational purposes in a series of transactions over an extended period of years. The first donations made from 1960 to 1965 were about 30 acres to the Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady for the Ollie Steele Burden Manor. Most of the remaining 450 acres of the property were given to LSU through a series of donations beginning in 1967.

The property was committed to LSU for various uses centered around the study of agriculture and horticulture on the Burden Agricultural Research Plantation and for Steele Burden's Rural Life Museum.

"We always focus on Steele," Murrill said, "but the property was given by Steele, Ione and Pike. While Steele was instrumental in the museum, his brother, sister and sister-in-law were instrumental in giving something to put the museum on." Steele Burden in his donation of the property to LSU had set aside one acre where he wanted to preserve a slave cabin from a Louisiana plantation. "He knew things dealing with slavery were being destroyed," Floyd said.

Burden had the habit of roaming south Louisiana looking at old buildings. "He was just riding and looking," said contractor William J. Brown III.

Brown had met Burden when he was working with another contractor to build an addition to Burden's house. "During that work, he told me some of the things that he was interested in. I had an interest in old homes and history. Some kind of way, we became friends," Brown said.

Brown often accompanied Burden on these trips. "We got out and went under houses," Brown said. "All that period of time, we were just riding and looking. Mr. Burden was driving the countryside to see what he wanted."

On a trip from New Orleans, Burden saw some dilapidated wooden buildings on Welham Plantation near Convent in St. James Parish. Burden learned that they were to be bulldozed to create more land for farming. "They had already jacked up the overseer's house and taken the porch off," Brown said.

At the last second, Burden saved the buildings by agreeing to move them to the property his family had donated to LSU.

Burden saved the overseer's house, the commissary and four slave cabins. "The university paid to move some. Steele paid a lot himself and Ione paid for some," said Murrill.

Beginning in the fall of 1970, Brown reworked the buildings under Burden's direction. "Basically they were in bad shape," said Brown. But Burden knew just what he wanted done with the buildings.

"Nothing was written. Nothing was drawn. His expression was 'I think I would like this to be done,'" Brown said.

Brown describes the development of the Rural Life Museum in a video in which he explains how Burden preserved each building in the complex. He tells how Burden had the siding removed from one of the cabins from Welham to recreate a blacksmith's shop. Another cabin he turned into a typical plantation schoolhouse. Another cabin became a one-room schoolhouse. He moved a three-room cabin separated into two single residential cabins.

Brown recalled how Burden continued to find other buildings to move to the property to restore. He moved a church from the St. Gabriel area. He restored a shotgun house from Bayou Goula. He found a log house off Highway 190.

The one building Burden could not acquire was a typical Cajun cabin, a wooden grave marker, now located inside the restored church, being used as a pantry shelf in a cabin when Burden found it.

In another cabin, originally the schoolhouse on Bagatelle Plantation, Burden recreated a typical plantation kitchen. West of Alexandria, he found an authentic "dog-trot" house, which he also moved onto the property.

One of the major restorations was of Burden's own home, built by his grandparents in 1856. The home, originally three rooms and a porch, had been renovated and added to on several different occasions. When the Burdens moved to the plantation from downtown in 1921, they did a major renovation of the home.

"When we got ready to redo the home, Mr. Burden gave me a pencil sketch he had made of the front of the house," Brown said. "He said, 'This is kind of what I want it to look like. Let's make it pretty.'"

Brown said that in the whole project, that drawing was the only drawing that Burden gave him. "We did the restoration of the Burden home according to the way the house was, what Mr. Burden remembered and what he wanted," Brown said.

John C. Monroe III inherited a part of the Burden property from his aunt, Jeanette Monroe Burden, the widow of Pike Burden. In 1959, Steele, Ione and Pike Burden designated three seven-acre home sites and partitioned the property so that each of them owned one of the tracts. Pike Burden's tract contained his home, Windrush, completed in 1940, and the surrounding property. Jeanette Monroe Burden inherited Pike Burden's home site at his death in 1965. When she died in 1970, she left her home site to her two nephews, John C. Monroe III and William Monroe, who divided the property among themselves. John C. Monroe III and his wife, Frances, live at Windrush on the only remaining privately owned parcel of property on the grounds of the Burden Plantation.

"The Burdens created this place through their desire to keep the property together," said John C. Monroe III.

"We had realized earlier that we had to do something with this place and we didn't want to sell it. Burden Foundation decided to offer it to the university and they agreed to take the place which was a perfect spot for the museum," Ione Burden said in the Sunday Advocate Aug. 31, 1980.

Considered the businesswoman in the family, Ione Burden served for many years as director of social activities and assistant to the dean of student affairs and the dean of
In 1972, Ione Burden, right, and Steele Burden, left, donated their family home to LSU, represented by President John A. Hunter, center.

Steele Burden moved an old church from the St. Gabriel area and restored it on the museum property.

In 1972, Ione Burden, right, and Steele Burden, left, donated their family home to LSU, represented by President John A. Hunter, center.

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women at LSU. She died in 1983.

The barn at the entrance to the museum was built to house the Burden collections and other donations that followed. “People originally were unsure they wanted to give family heirlooms to the museum,” Monroe said. As the museum became more and more established, “people knocked at the doors to donate items.”

Over the years, the barn has been added to six times. “Every time it filled up,” Monroe said.

Many important items in the museum came from a collection of rural artifacts assembled by Dr. Ambrose H. Storch of New Orleans. The collection, purchased for $18,000 by the LSU Foundation in 1971, was well-known and had been sought by the Smithsonian Institution.

As important as the museum buildings were to Burden, so was the landscaping, which Burden carried out with assistance from George Raby, his longtime employee. Raby had come to the plantation from St. Francisville in 1940 when he was 18 years old. Members of his family lived and starved on the property. To this day, Raby continues to look after many of the plants and trees chosen by Burden for the landscaping.

Raby told how Burden designed the gardens in an article in the Sunday Advocate April 28, 1996. Burden would step off a bed and then tell Raby where to plant by making marks with the heel of his shoe.

“He’d say I want a cherry myrtle here, then he’d walk some more and make another mark with his heel,” Raby said.

Burden and Raby put in their last flower bed just a few days before Burden died in 1995 at the age of 95. “The day he passed away, he was thinking about working on this place,” Floyd said.

Burden worked on his project for the beauty and historic value of the work, but he had little interest in having the world see his treasure. “At one point, you had to call the public relations department at LSU to gain admission to the museum,” Monroe said. “And children under 14 were not permitted at the museum unless they were with their parents.”

Nonetheless, Samuel and a group of loyal volunteers developed a decent program for the museum, probably without Burden’s complete blessing. “He felt that there were no facilities here for ladies,” she said.

“That just didn’t fit with the style of the museum he wanted to see,” Monroe said. “The displays were laid out in a way that needed supervision to see them. He didn’t want things behind Plexiglas.”

However, over the years, Burden began to realize the importance of having others enjoy his collections. “He realized before he died that for this thing to exist, it couldn’t be just a private retreat as he would have it,” Monroe said.

“He realized that for the place to exist in perpetuity, it had to have broad support,” Murrill said. “He came around to the view that he had to open it up. He reached it on his own, as he did all of his decisions.”

Burden’s museum is now a major attraction, visited last year by nearly 60,000 people, and now open 360 days a year.

In 1980, noted British museum authority Kenneth Hudson selected the LSU Rural Life Museum as one of the top 10 museums in the world.

“The challenge today is how to open the museum up without losing the character the Burdens wanted to create here. How to do enough of that without losing the atmosphere and memory,” Monroe said.

“When it comes to the museum or the grounds, Steele was the master planner. He had a vision of what things should be. With him gone, we lost the master planner,” Floyd said. “It’s so important that we preserve the wishes of the Burden family and retain this remarkable piece of property in the heart of Baton Rouge.”