



Why the 'Lotus' in Lotus Street?

By Arthur O. Tucker

I take special delight in the names of the housing developments popping up in Lower Delaware. Names that include "stone" or "ridge" seem comical to me when stones and ridges are, quite frankly, just plain rare on the coastal plain.

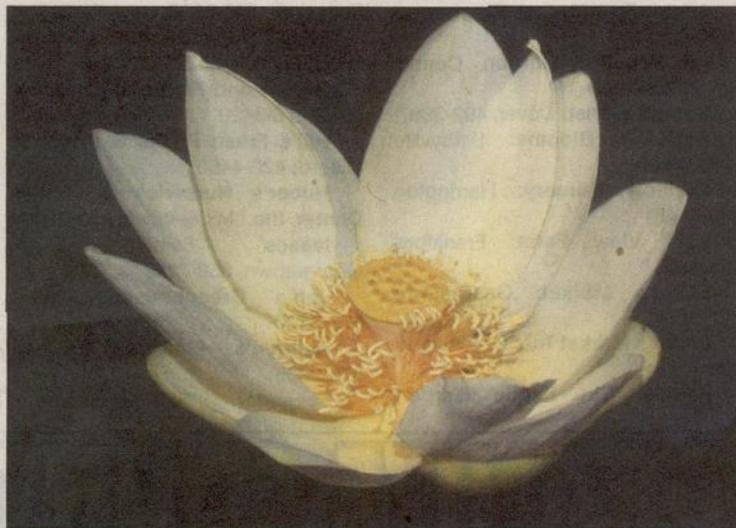
Even funnier is the use of "woods" or "stream" when the woods had to be demolished to construct the houses, and the stream had to be covered up because of liability.

In the old days, names arose because of use, not some dream of a developer. Take Lotus Street in Dover, for example. The American lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*, alias *N. pentapetala* in the older literature) is a species as magnificent as its Asian relative, *N. nucifera*, but seems to be less cultivated as an ornament because of its ease of cultivation — too easy (most people prefer plants somewhere between endangered/threatened and aggressive)!

The American lotus, also called yellow lotus or water-chinquapin, is native to flood plains of major rivers and their tributaries in the east-central U.S.; it was widely distributed by the Indians, who utilized the seeds and tubers for food.

The Claude E. Phillips Herbarium has dried specimens of the American lotus collected along the St. Jones River in 1926, 1927, and 1930 (the earliest recorded observations date from 1863).

Postcards published by the Central News Co. in Dover in the 1920s lauded the thick stands of the American lotus along the St. Jones. The fame of the lotus beds on the St. Jones River spread, and parties were held in August to view the lotus from a street



Submitted photo

Thick stands of American lotus grew along the St. Jones River, and parties were held in August to view the lotus from a street in Dover that eventually became known as Lotus Street.

Garden Tales from DSU

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The sublime stands of American lotus inspired painters and poets. Ethel Pennewill Brown Leach painted these in 1931, and her painting is now at the Biggs Museum of American Art in Dover. In the 1920s, Alden R. Benson published a poem in his book *Lotus Lilies* (here excerpted):

*In a graceful curve,
On the Saint Jones' River,
Nestles a secluded, sunkissed
little bay, ... Selected this cozy
nook*

*As the dwelling place of the
Queen of all Water Lilies,
The Lotus.*

Sadly, the overly aggressive nature of the American lotus on the

St. Jones was its downfall, impeding navigation. Apparently, starting in the 1930s, a combination of federal and state efforts with both dredging and herbicides eventually reduced the population to just a few plants today. Saline intrusion, especially during frequent droughts, impedes the comeback of these thick stands, postcards, paintings, poetry, and the viewing parties of yesteryear!

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.