



For Immediate Release

September 13, 2017

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Cummer Gardens Sustain Extensive Damage

Jacksonville, Fla.— The Cummer Gardens were severely impacted by Hurricane Irma and will be closed to the public. While the staff, collection, and building of the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens were not substantially affected, the historic Cummer Gardens sustained extensive damage. The lower tier of all three formal garden spaces, which are listed in the National Register of Historic Places, remained submerged for more than 24 hours, resulting in the uprooting of plants, detached railing along the river, broken lighting, pervasive salinization of the soil, large amounts of debris, and significant impact to much of the physical infrastructure, including drainage, electric, fencing, and the well that services the landscape.

Nearly \$1 million has been invested in the gardens in recent years, including the restoration of the historic Olmsted Garden in 2013 and the English Garden in 2017, reconstruction of the Italian Garden Folly, relaying of brick pathways, updating of drainage systems, conservation of sculptures and fountains, fortification of the bulkhead, and installation of new bulkhead railing in 2016-2017. The Garden Folly structure, brick pathways, and English Garden fountain remain intact.

Museum leadership is working with vendors and contractors to further assess the situation, make some immediate repairs, and create a plan and timeline to reconstruct the gardens. Additionally, staff is working with colleagues at other historic gardens, as resources for best practices and to locate opportunities for funding. At this time, there is no projected reopen date for the gardens.

The Cummer Gardens contain a variety of historic plant materials, including many historic species of azaleas that were planted in Mrs. Cummer's time and cannot be readily purchased. As many of the plant species in the gardens are no longer commercially available, Museum staff has worked over the years to propagate the specimens that remained on the property. The scarcity of some of the historic plant material makes the reconstruction effort a unique challenge.

“As a museum and an institution listed in the National Register of Historic Places, historical accuracy and integrity are of the utmost importance,” says Holly Keris, Chief Operating Officer & Chief Curator of the Cummer Museum. “We will be working as quickly as possible to create a plan for the future of these beloved gardens. Although the damage to the gardens is extensive, we

are fortunate that the staff is safe and the building and collection were unharmed. It could have been much worse.”

Many people in the community have reached out to offer volunteer assistance after the storm. However, because of hazards in the lower gardens, including exposed electrical wiring, community volunteers will not be allowed on the property at this time for a large-scale cleanup. The historic gardens are being evaluated by our landscaping firm for next steps. Staff is working to ensure that the Museum’s interior spaces are ready to open to the public tomorrow, Thursday, September 14, for regular business hours. There is no projected reopen date for the gardens. Staff is also working to contact individuals and organizations that may have upcoming rental events in the gardens.

The Museum staff and leadership would like to thank the community for their outpouring of support. While the gardens are inaccessible to the public, the Museum will be offering half-price admission. Should visitors choose to pay full price, half of the admission fee will be applied to the Garden Reconstruction Fund as a donation.

“As reconstruction costs are unknown at this time, any contributions are welcome and appreciated to help restore these spaces as quickly as possible,” states Keris.

Members of the community may donate directly to the Garden Reconstruction Fund at cummermuseum.org/garden-reconstruction.

For further information, including high-resolution images and descriptions, to schedule media tours, or to schedule interviews with staff or guest experts, please contact Amber Sesnick at 904.899.6034 or asesnick@cummermuseum.org.

For more than 50 years, the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens has been committed to engaging and inspiring through the arts, gardens, and education. A permanent collection of more than 5,000 objects and historic gardens on a riverfront campus offers more than 165,000 annual visitors a truly unique experience on the First Coast. Nationally-recognized education programs serve adults and children of all abilities. For more information, including hours, visit www.cummermuseum.org.

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