

Geddy Garden News

While doing a program at the St. George Tucker House last week I started watching through the window the archaeologists at work in the yard and decided to investigate.

Matt Hyland, a William and Mary graduate student, gave me a tour of the site and I found it most interesting. St. George Tucker is of special interest to me because of his involvement with gardening in the late 18th century in Williamsburg.

He had arrived from Bermuda in 1771, attended William and Mary, studied law and settled first in Petersburg. In 1788 he purchased one and a half acres in the city of Williamsburg. After moving the location of three buildings on the property to face the busy Market Square, he also began to design his garden.

In the colonies we did not have "professional landscape architects" until the 19th century. By professional I mean those with the technical knowledge and drafting skills to professionally do a layout according to the scale of the ground. There were, however, certain talented amateur gardeners here at the time who had an artistic approach to landscape gardening, composing and creating gardens that were representative of their personal expression and tastes. St. George Tucker was among them. A bit earlier, others were John Custis, William Byrd II, Alexander Spotswood, Thomas Jefferson and, closer to Tucker's time, Joseph Prentis.

The archaeologists are involved in landscape archaeology now on the property, which Matt said will be ending in another week or so. Landscape archaeology differs from domestic archaeology in both its goal and its methods. The goal in domestic archaeology is to determine what activities took place inside the house, and with landscape the focus and concentration are upon the land and outside spaces.

The floatation method of archaeology is being employed at this site. There was some aerial and infrared photography done before the dig and some ground penetrating radar. Contour surveys defined the raised and lowered areas which helped to determine the planting beds.

A study of this site has been ongoing since 1994. At that time some of Tucker's garden layout was determined, such as his marl path. A water table or drainage ditch was discovered and in 1994 hand dug. In 1995 it was mechanically dug out.

Today various types of analysis are being done such as pollen analysis and soil chemistry analysis. Soil chemistry analysis serves to find features to be dug which helps to indicate occupational changes of the site. They are also doing phylolithe analysis which determines hydrated silica. An important earlier find from the phylolithe was the indication that St. George Tucker had a palm tree growing in his garden, a most curious and interesting find!

In the 1930s, at the time of the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, Arthur Shurcliff moved Nathaniel Tucker's law office to the rear corner of the property to serve as a tea house, a garden feature.

St. George Tucker was planning his garden during a transitional time when close attention was being paid to nature's own order of growth. Plants, water, and wilderness were combined to create natural esthetics. This was termed, "gardenesque."

Written documentation supplied a lot of information about St. George Tucker's property. We know of his nursery, kitchen garden, and formal garden. He had a special interest in cultivating fruit trees and shrubs. We also know he had slaves and that his second wife, Lila, was an avid and passionate gardener. There exists an 1850 insurance policy that locates the stables and outbuildings on the property on Nicholson St. There were willow trees in front of the stables.

In 1804 St. George Tucker retired as a law professor to be a justice. Baurraud looked after his garden when he was away in the year 1810. We know he espaliered his peach trees and grew Mock Orange. He had a long life and died in 1827 at 75 years of age.

The property was surveyed when Coleman owned it. Today all of the outbuildings are reconstructed. Shurcliff planted boxwood and a bulb garden and created a bowling green which in the 1960s was replaced by Hollyhocks and some other low maintenance plants.

When we finish our work at the St. George Tucker House, which may take many more years I am told, I hope it will be possible to enjoy a view from the windows of the house that will enable us to share a view very similar to what St. George Tucker himself enjoyed on his artistic landscape.

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