AN EXPLORATION OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY GARDENING AS A MECHANISM FOR STATUS GAIN

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This essay was for the class “Colonial Virginia,” as taught by Dr. Tom Sosnowski and Dr. Leslie Heaphy. The assignment was to write a research paper regarding some aspect of colonial history and society, with a focus on the Williamsburg area.

When traveling through the lush countryside of Virginia, it is difficult for the eye to settle on any one single thing to admire, whether it is the rolling hills, manicured farms, marshy beaches or the vibrant flora seeping through every crack and crevice. Perhaps no place embodies this sense of lushness more than the historical section of Williamsburg, where reconstruction began almost a hundred years ago in an attempt to recapture the spirit of life during the American colonial era. While not a large area, being only about a mile long, and less than half that wide, it is so full of details that seeing all of it is difficult for any traveler, regardless of allotted time.

Very little of this restored section of the town is left empty without serving a purpose of some kind; each nook and cranny is manicured, planted, carved, or a variation or combination thereof. Even the alleyways are made decorative through the use of scrolled gates, paved walkways and trimmed shrubberies. The majority of these additions to Williamsburg are based on archaeological evidence, which leads to some small speculation on what the colonists were trying to accomplish by molding every square inch of space to their design.

One of the most artfully planned and pervasive features of this area are the gardens. At first glance, they appear to be what is seen on the surface: pretty flowers, pretty designs, perhaps a nice little bench. Upon closer inspection, and in viewing Williamsburg as a whole, it gradually becomes apparent that more is at stake than just spending a few minutes of free time in planting tulips. The larger the home or building, the more elaborate the garden. The higher the social stature that an individual possessed, the more extensive were his grounds and plantings. Recognizing this pattern led to a deeper exploration of gardening in the eighteenth-century as more than just a past-time, but also as an instrument for the gain of social as well as political status. While not restricted only to the middle and upper classes, this trend is reserved primarily for those of substantial means and wealth.

In the eighteenth century, determining someone’s social standing was accomplished in much the same way it is in contemporary society, through an appraisal of items of status. Today, perhaps a Rolex or a Coach handbag would signify personal wealth; in the eighteenth century, young colonial women might inspect the calf muscles of young men to see if they were proficient in the hobbies of the gentry, such as lawn bowling. In a broader sense, the garden of a family home might also tell of a person’s background in multiple different ways.

For example, if the size of the garden was substantial, it showed wealth in property ownership. This could imply “good family standing,” because the earliest of settlers claimed the largest and best-situated parcels of land in the New World. It might also show wealth due to the various locations, 2007. See figure 1, page 20.
number of slaves that would be required to tend to large pieces of real estate. As the mower had not yet been invented, it required persons who were enslaved, using a pair of scissors, to keep a lawn well manicured, which illustrated a wealth so excessive that the slaves had nothing better to do. The desire to showcase extensive property was so pronounced, in fact, that the use of a "ha-ha," an optical illusion in formal gardening involving terraces and narrowing pathways to make the grounds appear almost endless, became highly desired and used among the wealthiest of citizens in colonial Chesapeake towns.

In addition to size, the variety of plants and types could attest to continuing ties with aristocratic relations or political connections back in England, or perhaps other countries throughout Europe. An example of this may be found in Thomas Jefferson's lifelong correspondences with a few of the many friends he made during his time in France. One notable instance would be his letter to the Secrétaire De La Societe D'Agriculture de Paris, in which he thanks the Society for honoring him with the title of Foreign Associate. "Should the labors of others, however, on this side the water, produce any thing which may advance the objects of their institution, I shall with great pleasure become the instrument of it's communication." With this letter, he ensured that the sharing of information and material between the two countries was a two-way correspondence.

The time required to tend to a garden was not only invested in flowers and shrubbery, but also in their more practical cousin, the kitchen or vegetable garden. John Randolph, in his Treatise on Gardening, says, "Cauliflowers must be sown critically to a day, or else there is no dependence on the success of them." Even the cookbooks of Williamsburg say the gardens, "... required constant and careful Effort from the Householder to get a proper Supply of Seeds and to superintend the Planting, Cultivating and Harvesting of the Kitchen Garden." Of course, that is not to say that a utilitarian garden could not also be seen as ornamental; Mr. Jefferson, in a letter to Charles Willson Peale, remarks on nothing being more beautiful than the rows and lines of produce, waving in a soft breeze.

A garden could also help to illustrate how well educated the caretaker and engineer of the garden was, along with encouraging a continuing education in the field of Natural History. With Linnaeus’ system of plant identification widely available in the eighteenth century, the exchange of seeds, bulbs and other material took on a decidedly scientific flavor. In John Randolph's Treatise, widely referenced by contemporaries such as Thomas Jefferson in his own writings on gardens, he breaks down the names of herbs and vegetables per "Dr. Linnous," in an endorsement of the use of common terms. In fact, Linnaeus' impact on the understanding of botany has been proclaimed as being the equivalent of, "... the American Revolution in general shock and subsequent intellectual influence."

Intelligence and education were illustrated in colonial gardening by the engineered designs so liberally displayed throughout the Chesapeake region as well. The illustrations of some of the gardens reconstructed in Williamsburg are more difficult to follow than road maps of Washington, D.C. An in-depth understanding of Mathematics, in addition to intimately understanding

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12 Baron, 202.
14 Randolph, 24.
15 Leighton, 86-87.
the nature of the plants used, were required to complete construction of many of these formal gardens. One explanation for the geometric patterns commonly used in garden designs in the eighteenth century could be an attempt at "...controlled rationalization of space" that befit the Enlightenment."

Classic literature had its role to play as well. Ann Leighton remarks, "The idea of being able to repeat lines of Virgil as one paced in one's garden (obviously having to be laid out by oneself with one's stride and elocutionary abilities in mind), and then to come upon a feature or folly representing exactly what Virgil was describing became an enviable achievement." This balancing act, of symbolism and season within framework, would have required the sharpest of minds and the most flexible of schedules.

Although his schedule may not have been entirely flexible, George Washington was viewed as having one of the finest minds of the Virginian gentry; however, he had none of the literary or classical pretensions of his fellow colonists. His grounds were free of most of the more ostentatious displays, such as statues or temples, and practicality is what governed his designs at Mount Vernon. General Washington's style was about simplicity, with clean lines and understated gentility; this would eventually affect contemporary garden design styles, and he is seen as "...providing an insight into the mentalité of the highest level of the Virginia gentry during a half-century of remarkable changes in American culture and society." This is clearly highlighted in the correspondences he shared with fellow gardeners, like Thomas Jefferson, who plainly de-

15 Leighton, 248.
16 Ibid, 256.

One major factor was the decline in the tobacco market. This was caused by a variety of issues such as a glutted market, and smaller suppliers selling directly to European buyers. Also contributing to this decline in power was

18 Baron, 183.
19 Pogue, 109; Leighton, 256.
20 Baron, 189.
21 Leighton, 75.
22 Pogue, 107.
the dwindling control of the Church of England, and the upswing in popularity of the evangelical movement. Within this frame of religious upheaval and shrinking economic control, the elite class sought to hold on to power in the most readily available way: by endorsing the patriotic move toward a break with England and stepping into the roles of leadership.  

The gentry not only used the American revolution as a stepping stone for recapturing power, but they used smaller tools and devices to maintain that control, such as displays of status and wealth. John Adams, when viewing a Baltimore gentleman’s gardens, was quoted as saying, “... the large garden enclosed in lime and before the yard two fine rows of large cherry trees which lead out to the public road. There is a fine prospect about it. Mr. Lux lives like a prince.” This was said with admiration and respect, and an implication that a well tended garden had the potential to completely alter the way in which the gardener was viewed. A well-known clergyman and geographer of the era, Jedidiah Morse, once said of a peer’s grounds, “Its fine situation... the arrangement and variety of forest-trees - the gardens – the artificial fish ponds... discover a refined and judicious taste. Ornament and utility are happily united. It is, indeed, a seat worthy of a Republican Patriot.” The botanical marriage of ornamental design and utility were viewed as illustrating or showcasing the kind of mind that was perfectly suited to be in power and control during the establishment of the new American government.

Some research claims that it was not only a desire to increase personal social standing that drove the designs and displays of formal gardens in the eighteenth century, but there was also a need to control the most powerful force known to humankind: nature. Thomas Jefferson wrote, to Charles Willson Peale, “The spontaneous energies of the earth are a gift of nature, but they require the labor of man to direct their operation.” He was not alone in this kind of thinking. Mark Leone, a twentieth century sociologist, suggests that one reason for the upsurge in the popularity of formal gardens in the late eighteenth century was due to the gentry’s attempt to “convince people that a rational social order based on nature was possible and that those with such access to its laws were its natural leaders.” This concept, that through gardening humans were attempting to establish control of the thing they most feared or was the most unpredictable, seems to be widely accepted among those that study gardening, especially in regard to the colonial and immediately post-colonial eras.

Control and status: recurring themes in eighteenth century gardening, to be sure. There are some interpretations of the gardens which postulate their use as focusing more on individual than familial status. The increasingly popular use of terraces helped to demonstrate this theory, placing the homes of the privileged (and, of course, the privileged themselves) on higher ground than those whom they could look down upon. This type of setting acted almost like a stage for the gentry, allowing them to perform as they believe aristocracy should for those passing by.

Terraces also allowed for conservation of space in much the same way as ha-has did in the eighteenth century, through both leveling of the property and optical illusion. John Adams was quoted as saying about Mount Clare, the Maryland home of Margaret Tilghman Carroll, “There is a most beautiful walk from the house down to the water; there is a descent not far from the house; you have a fine garden then you descend

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24 Kryder-Reid, Elizabeth. “As is the gardener, so is the garden: The archaeology of landscape as myth.” Historical Archaeology of the Chesapeake. Smithsonian Institute Press (1994), 132.
26 Sarudy, 50.
28 Baron, 202.
29 Pogue, 108.
30 Sarudy, xii; Kryder-Reid, 132; Pogue, 108.
31 Sarudy, 3-24.
32 Image, Berkley Plantation terraces, seen from be low. Stratton, Lisa. See figure 8, pg. 21.
a few steps and have another fine garden; you go
donw a few more and have another." The illu-
sion of almost infinite property, as well as giving
the impression to guests of a plethora of different
gardens, feeds right into this prevalent aristocra-
tic need to display status and exert dominance.

Another interesting facet of the social
impact of gardening on colonial Americans was
how it seemed to be the common thread to tie to-
gether people from many different backgrounds.
These diverse, international gardeners became
their own social group, exchanging seeds, bulbs,
and advice, along with providing political con-
nections throughout the known world. One
gentleman, Peter Collinson from London, acted
almost as a fulcrum for many of the gardening
aficionados, tying together such strange garden
bedfellows as the King and Queen of England,
the physician to the Czarina of Russia, Mark
Catesby (author of one of the earliest and most
comprehensive books on Natural History from
early North America), and John Custis (future
father-in-law of Martha Dandridge, who more
famously became Martha Washington). Mr. Col-
linson was also a member of the Royal Society,
which would one day boast such members and
correspondents as Thomas Jefferson. These in-
terconnections between practitioners of the art of
gardening contributed to a lessening of the dis-
tance between the wealthy and the common man.

As the eighteenth century drew to a close,
gardening was not reserved strictly for the gen-
try. The exchanging of seeds and plants helped
to break down class barriers, as did the opening
of many public gardens and commercial nurser-
ies. Additionally, as Sarudy puts it, "Leisure time
was growing in the new nation, and both the
gentry and their less wealthy neighbors could
now find the time to indulge in an avocation such
as pleasure gardening." One example would
be Charles Taliaferro (pronounced Tolliver) from
Williamsburg, who was not gentry born, but was
instead a craftsman. He made chairs and coaches

for many years, and purchased a home from a
man named Thomas Crease, who had been a
professional gardener before moving to Williams-
burg. Taliaferro kept up the gardens until his
death in 1804, when they were taken over by the
Cole family until the early twentieth century. This
shows how gardening was slowly becoming a past-
time for everyone, even those that worked
with their hands for a living, not just the aristoc-
racracy of the Chesapeake.

However, when America was still in its
colonial era, there was very little that demon-
strated the wealth and status of the privileged as
did their formal gardens. Possessing extensive
grounds, planting them to their fullest possible
potential, and showing them off as often as pos-
sible was more than just a hobby for many colo-
nists. As has been shown, it was crucial to the
establishment of political connections, family alli-
ances and friendships, and power over all whom
the gentry viewed as beneath them. During a
time when everything pertained to appearance,
one of the most interesting aspects of the use of
gardens as a status-gaining mechanism was that
this was not a superficial or momentary trend,
possessing no substance. The love of gardening
creating, growing and taming nature- has become
an integral part of the American spirit, regardless
of the loss or gain of stature.

83 Sarudy, 48-49.
34 Leighton, 104-110.
35 Sarudy, 65.
36 Brinkley and Chappell, 131.
Bibliography


Figure 1: Alley next to Raleigh Tavern, Williamsburg, VA.

Figure 2: Ha-ha at Basset Hall, Williamsburg, VA.
Figure 3: Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, with pond and flower walk, Charlottesville, VA.

Figure 4: Garden at the Benjamin Powell House, Williamsburg, VA.

Figure 5: Garden at George Washington's Mount Vernon, VA.

Figure 6: Gardens and orchards at Monticello, Charlottesville, VA.

Figure 7: Terraces (almost a ha-ha) as seen from below, Berkeley Plantation, Charles City, VA.

Figure 8: Alexander Craig Memorial Garden, Williamsburg VA.

Eighteenth Century Gardening