

## Colonial Williamsburg

### American member Deborah McMillin introduces some of the reconstructed historic gardens of this famous living history museum

Colonial Williamsburg is an outdoor living history museum where the union flag flies daily over the capital building. It is the recreation of the 18th century revolutionary capital Williamsburg, Virginia. Dr W.A.R Goodwin, the rector of the Bruton Parish Church, and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr. joined together in 1926 to begin an ambitious undertaking to return the former capital to its 18th century appearance. Extensive historical, archival and archaeological research was undertaken to reconstruct or restore houses, shops, public buildings and the gardens of that time.

Williamsburg is a city with strong historical and political ties with England. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill visited the Colonial city in 1946 with then Commanding General Dwight Eisenhower. Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip visited in 1957 and in 2007 on a state visit for the 400th anniversary of Jamestown.

The London Company established their first settlement, Jamestown in 1607 not far from the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. After years of difficulty it was decided in 1699 to move the capital inland to a town on high ground between the York and the James River, renamed Williamsburg after King William III. As a small market town, its main asset was the College of William & Mary and Bruton Parish Church. After being chartered as a city capital, Williamsburg became wealthy, the centre of cultural, religious, educational and political life. It was also a focal point of gardening activity in Virginia.

#### Symbol of Prestige and Power

When Alexander Spotswood became governor of Williamsburg in 1710, he was not satisfied with the Governor's Palace that was still under construction. He began to expand the building of the Palace and the gardens. The elaborate gardens with a canal, created at great expense, incurred cost overruns, which led to a falling out between the governor and the members of the Assembly. It is suggested that he was attempting to distinguish himself with his gardens in competition with the gardens of local plantation owner William Byrd and townsman John Custis.

The precise layout and rigid symmetry of the grounds of the Governor's Palace is similar to the English country estates during the reign of William and Mary (1689-1702), with the Dutch influence introduced into England by William III. Broad walkways, manicured geometrical parterres, clipped hedges of boxwood, (a preference of the king) large yaupon holly topiaries, lead urns planted with native *Yucca aloifolia* and a pleached arbour of American beeches for shade would be a statement by Governor Spotswood that he was equal to his English counterparts. After completion there were no other gardens in the colonies at that time that matched the Governor's garden for elegance and intricacy of design.

In the terraced vegetable and herb garden conveniently located behind the kitchen, were grown many of the vegetables that would have been placed on the governor's

plate. Plantings of squash, peas, peppers, beans and tomatoes were interspaced among marigolds, peonies, fennel, parsley and rosemary. For the aristocratic dinner table cardoons, artichokes, asparagus and horseradish would be grown. Peach trees even today are spaced along the side of the garden. The fruit garden is in a sheltered location with cordoned apples and pears, espaliered plums and peaches and numerous fig trees. Fruit trees were imported from Europe since the native fruit trees of crab apple, wild cherry and plum were of inferior quality and taste.

#### Security in the Classic

The classical formal style of gardening peaked in England about the same time that Williamsburg became the Royal Capital. The trend in England was turning to natural landscapes. This did not appeal to settlers in Virginia. They were reminded of untamed nature in all directions. They wanted safety. A garden that was manicured and enclosed within a fence or hedge was security. It would be the gardens of England in the time of William and Mary they were remembering and would maintain.

#### Geometric and Balanced

A short distance from the Palace is the brick home and garden of George Wythe, a well to do Virginian. He was a professor of law at the College of William and Mary and the first Virginian signer of the Declaration of Independence. His reconstructed gardens are formal with the reliable boxwood *Buxus sempervirens* bordering lengthy rows of perennials and annuals. A pleached American hornbeam arbour ends the main path with the garden a mirror image on each side of the walk. His brick walkway, more expensive than gravel or crushed shells used in many of the tradesmen's gardens, was a sign of social status. His wife Elizabeth was in charge of the kitchen garden and there is a small plot planted with common vegetables and herbs of that time. George



Governor's palace: a touch of elegance



### George Wythe's garden

Wythe was interested in fruits. His orchard was planted with plums, black cherries, pears and paw-paws and figs that were his favourite. At one time he sent to his friend and former student Thomas Jefferson, pomegranates, nectarines, apricot grafts, grapevines and peas for his garden.

### “A Garden Inferior to Few”

John Custis was born in 1678 on the Eastern Shore of Virginia but was educated in England. He was a shrewd businessman, wealthy and owned a tobacco plantation near Williamsburg. He took up gardening at a new home he built in Williamsburg in 1717. We know of his gardens' success and failures as his letters have been collected and preserved as the *Letter Book*. A proposal for archaeological investigation of the Custis Garden was done for the possibility of future reconstruction of the property. The report is titled, as Custis had described his garden to Peter Collinson, 'A Garden Inferior To Few'. Historically, it is recognized that his garden was important since it was well documented and showed the influence of England on colonial planting and design. Unfortunately, John Custis's house and gardens have not been reconstructed.

### 'Wee Brothers of the Spade'

John Custis had four acres of garden with gravel pathways, arbours, and classical statutory, topiary and ornate plant containers. He was curious, experimenting and documenting his success and failures in his garden. His garden was considered to be one of the best stocked in Virginia and second only to the Governor's garden. John Custis's passion to collect exotic, colourful plants led him to a friendship and 12 years of detailed correspondence concerning botanical matters with Peter Collinson, who named John Custis as one of his 'Wee Brothers of the Spade'.

Peter Collinson, a successful London merchant lived and gardened in Peckham. When John Custis sent to Collinson the Virginia bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*), it was the start of a life-long friendship. Later he sent other botanical rarities to London; from the sorrel tree of the marshlands, the fringe tree, (*Chionanthus virginicus* L.) rare rose-coloured dogwood trees and the American magnolia (*M. tripetala* L.), from the forests of eastern Virginia. Custis's fruit orchard included peach and nut trees from seeds and sets sent to him by Collinson. His garden was colourful with Italian tuberose, chrysanthemums, Persian lilac, lilies, polyanthus, hyacinth, cyclamen, altheas, striped crown imperial lily, globe amaranth, china aster, white foxgloves, double tulips, he

mixed with natives. Since Collinson purposely sent varieties of plants that were currently fashionable in Europe, Custis may have been the first gardener to grow many of these exotic plants in the colonies.

### 'John the Tory'

The Tidewater climate showed no mercy to the European plants in Williamsburg gardens. Summers were hot and dry. Arbours were needed to provide shade. To keep a large summer ornamental garden maintained or the vegetable garden producing, the gentry used slave labour. John Custis complained during the drought of 1738 that he had '3 strong Nigros continually filling large tubs of water' to keep his garden watered. Regardless, many plants including his prized established yews, perished and left his garden 'too native'. In the winter, blasts of cold air would destroy his favourite variegated evergreens. An early spring with a late frost would kill flower buds.

The only books available on gardening were written for the English gardens and climate. John Randolph of Williamsburg, the last king's attorney under the crown for the Virginia colony, wrote the first American book on kitchen gardening in 1765. It was titled *Treatise on Gardening* and subtitled *Adapted to the Present State of Our Climate*, and modelled on a similar manual by the English nurseryman Philip Miller. Randolph based his writings on his own garden experiences, focusing on how to garden in the Tidewater climate. He was nicknamed 'John the Tory' as he was a loyalist who went home to England on the eve of the Revolutionary War.

### A Garden 'Pro'

The Taliaferro-Cole House is where Thomas Crease, a professional gardener, lived with his wife for 32 years until his death in 1756. He was probably born in England, receiving his training there before coming to Williamsburg. He was the head gardener at the Governor's Palace from 1710-1726 and then at the College of William & Mary. He was able to supplement his income by selling 'Gentlemen' (plantation owners and town gardeners) seeds, vegetables, ornamental plants and trees that he grew in the college's botanical and kitchen gardens. He lived near John Custis so certainly they would have shared garden interests as Crease was one of the few professional gardeners in Williamsburg.

The recreated garden is structured with brick walkways, turf that separates three garden areas, methodically planted with a mix of native and exotic annuals and perennials that would have been in Williamsburg gardens to 1780. Picket fences are draped with American wisteria. The July blooming Crape Myrtle tree in the corner of the garden is a sign of status. Imported trees indicated wealth. The orchard with peach, plum



### The Pro's Garden with century-old myrtle



and apple is near the stable towards the back of the property.

### Colonial Garden

The Colonial Garden is the gentleman's vegetable garden of the 18th century, planted and physically maintained as it was in that time. The peppers, peas, tomatoes, kidney and runner beans grown in this garden are a sample of the heirloom vegetables that were popular in many household gardens. There are stories of cucumbers that grew to 3 feet in length and palm kale grown 8-9 feet tall used as English walking sticks. Herbs tucked among the vegetables, are culinary, medicinal and household herbs that the colonist would have used. The market was still an important food source for the family as growing their own was hard and uncertain.

Organic gardening at that time was the only option. Fermented manure provided bottom heat for seedbeds. Horses, poultry, sheep and cattle provided the fertilized manure. To deal with current pests that were not present in 18th century gardens, limewater, tobacco dust, chimney ash, manure tea and hand picking are used.

The garden is tended with 18th-century tools made in Colonial Williamsburg. Wheelbarrows were made in the wheelwright shop and the blacksmith made the rakes, hoes and spades. Hand-made baskets came from basket makers and buckets from



the cooper. The melon frames are covered with paper from the printer. A study of probate inventories of that time indicates that gardens were a function of class. The people who had garden tools tended to be wealthy, middle class, gentry, doctors, lawyers, merchants, plantation and tavern owners.

**Left: Colonial barrels are used today to hand-water the garden**

**Below: 18th century tools.....**



**...and an 18th century gardener**



### Decline

Near the end of the Revolutionary War Thomas Jefferson, governor of Williamsburg, advocated the move of the capital to Richmond, less vulnerable to attack from the British. The removal of the seat of government from Williamsburg in 1779 was the beginning of decline. The Governors Palace became a military hospital and was destroyed by fire in 1781. Further damage to the city occurred during the Civil War in 1862 when the Union army occupied the city. During the mid-1920s, Reverend Goodwin saw in the remaining houses and stores from the 1700s, the possibility to revive and restore the colonial capital. He approached John D. Rockefeller, Jr. with the vision to resurrect an entire colonial city, which would eventually encompass 173 acres (70 ha).

### Resurrection

To recreate the 18th-century gardens archaeological excavations suggested former garden layouts, including the garden axis and the size, shape and alignment of the planting beds. Research into tax records, insurance policies that included sketches and layouts of the lots and maps provided information. From surviving bits of holly and boxwood hedges the barebones of a gardens layout could be determined. Naturalist Mark Catesby, botanist John Bartram, explorer John Tradescant and gentlemen gardeners John Clayton and John Custis, had kept detailed records or correspondence of plants growing in Virginia. As the restoration of the Governor's Palace was to begin in 1929, a copperplate engraving of the Palace showing a portion of the garden was discovered in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. This guided the restoration of the palace garden. More than 65 gardens have been recreated.

### Tourist Mecca

After President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited the colonial city in 1934, it became a national tourist destination. Being less than 150 miles from the White House, the



city of Williamsburg is now a rest stop en route to Washington for foreign dignitaries with a tour of the colonial city included. If you visit Virginia, come stroll the streets and take a horse carriage ride in the world's largest theatre. Interpreters act out the roles of gentlemen, slaves, craftsman, tradesmen and gardeners. You might meet, as I did, an orator standing under a shade tree in a garden calling out for revolution. Colonial Williamsburg is a history we both share.

**Left: a native oak giving shade in the Saddle Shop courtyard**