

Inspirations from the Woodlands

Jefferson's Enduring Ties to Philadelphia's Botanical Riches

"...we are in sight both of Bartram's & Gray's gardens, but have the [Schuylkill] river between them & us..."

THOMAS JEFFERSON TO
MARTHA JEFFERSON RANDOLPH
PHILADELPHIA, MAY 26, 1793

FOR TWO-AND-A-HALF DECADES, beginning in 1775, Thomas Jefferson's political career demanded he periodically consider the City of Brotherly Love his home. Philadelphia, due to the actions of the Continental congress, was the home of liberty, the birthplace of democracy, and, for a time, the capital of the new nation. Philadelphia was also a gathering place for the premier naturalists, botanists, and horticulturists in America, and Jefferson was both disciple and leading figure among this elite circle. In 1797 Jefferson's peers elected him president of the American Philosophical Society, a prestigious organization located in Philadelphia that promoted scientific thinking and Enlightenment ideals. He presided over the society for eighteen years – throughout his vice-presidency and his two terms as president of the United States – and well into his retirement years. Jefferson's ties with Philadelphia remained an abiding influence throughout the remainder of his life, impacting even the landscape he would ultimately shape at Monticello.

Jefferson's Philadelphian associates were a wide-ranging assortment of individuals that included elite botanists, eru-

dite academics, seed merchants and nurserymen, and pioneering naturalists. John and William Bartram, Benjamin Smith Barton, Charles Willson Peale, Bernard McMahon – all infamous characters in this botanical arena – are frequently mentioned in our accounts of Jefferson and gardening. But there was one among Jefferson's botanical camaraderie – the well-heeled, gentleman gardener, William Hamilton (1743-1813) – who stood somewhat apart from the rest. Born into wealth and social prominence, Hamilton, at an early age, inherited an immense, 600-acre country seat, which he named The Woodlands. Hamilton remained a bachelor, sharing his home with his mother, nephew and two nieces, and he spent his lifetime designing and embellishing his property in the grand style of 18th-century English landed gentry. The sprawling estate was located on a high eminence on the west bank of the Schuylkill River, overlooking a bend of the river and commanding broad views of the surrounding countryside. It stood in close proximity to Bartram's garden and nursery, Gray's ferry (the city's principal southern entrance), and the Landreth seed company. Hamilton was a passionate collector and had constructed a one-hundred-forty foot greenhouse designed especially for his tender exotics. He was a serious student of botany and accruing plants was his passionate avocation. Scottish plant collector John Lyons



Mid-nineteenth-century view of the Philadelphia mansion The Woodlands.

(d. 1818), who introduced *Jeffersonia diphylla* into English gardens, and the German botanist Frederick Pursh (1774-1820), were among Hamilton's more astute garden managers. Pursh lived at The Woodlands from 1802 to 1805 and, in the introduction to his *Flora Americae Septentrionalis*, 1814, (which contained the plants described by the Lewis and Clark Expedition) he credited Hamilton's collections as being "particularly valuable for furnishing me with a general knowledge of the plants of [North America]." The French naturalist and explorer André Michaux (1746-1802) and the Bartrams were among many who supplied Hamilton with trees and other plants.

But, the sheer scale of Hamilton's land holdings and his ambitions for it, along with his flamboyant and extravagant life style, was likely intimidating to some of his more down-to-earth, horticulturally-minded contemporaries. University professors and taxonomic purists such as Drs. Benjamin Smith Barton and William P. C. Barton took their classes on frequent excursions into the countryside and The Woodlands was a popular destination, even though they held a general consensus that, "the curious person views it with delight, the naturalist quits it with regret." Hamilton was accused by many of being secretive and miserly with his plant posses-

sions, and there is good evidence for this. Bernard McMahon complained to Jefferson, "altho' he is in every other respect a particular friend of mine, he never offered me one [plant] in return." Hamilton often directed his personal secretary, George Smith, to inquire about prices of rare plants "anonymously," and his letters contained obsessive warnings that his choicest specimens, such as his prized China rose cuttings and South African geraniums, be kept "under lock & key," adding "no soul should be suffr'd alone in the pot or Tub enclosure." Criticisms of Hamilton's covetous nature, however, were often insensitive to the enormous effort and expense he himself put forth to seek out and obtain these unusual and highly desirable acquisitions in the first place.

There are ample accounts of Hamilton's generous hospitality as well, and he saw that the grounds were always perfectly maintained for an admiring public. Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, in his "Travels through America in 1797-1799, 1805..." gave the following description of his visits to "old acquaintances" in 1805:

"I spent Sunday with Mr. William Hamilton, owner of Wood-land, the famous residence near Philadelphia. The collection of foreign plants and bushes gathered from all three parts of the world, is the most numerous and beautiful which an individual may own."

A particularly evocative memoir, made in 1803, detailed the visit of Rev. Dr. Manasseh Cutler, a botanist and member of Congress from Massachusetts, who was en-route with his entourage to Washington, DC. The weary travelers arrived unannounced and were greeted by "Mr. Hamilton at his ease, smoking his cigar," who graciously treated them to an enchanting evening. The guests walked the pleasure grounds in near darkness on "lawns of green grass, frequently mowed," and viewed "at different distances numer-

ous copse of the native trees interspersed with artificial groves, which are of trees collected from all parts of the world.” Dr. Cutler was particularly impressed with Hamilton’s extensive greenhouses:

“Every part was crowded with trees and plants, from the hot climates, and such as I had never seen. All the spices. The Tea plant in full perfection. In short, he assured us, there was not a rare plant in Europe, Asia, Africa, from China and the islands in the South Sea, of which he had any account, which he had not procured.”

Hamilton entertained his guests until one in the morning, dining on a sumptuous meal while pouring over large botanical books from his library. Each time they turned to a particularly rare and superb plant, Hamilton would send one of his gardeners with a lantern to the green house to fetch the specimen for comparison.

Hamilton’s Arboreal Legacies

Hamilton’s place in the annals of horticulture in America is forever distinguished by his introduction of the ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), Lombardy poplar (*Populus nigra* ‘Italica’), Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*), and the tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*). Initially, these unusual novelties were afforded the highest regard and distributed and promoted with much fanfare and zeal by the nursery trade. Each of these species, for better or for worse, has had an enormous impact on the American landscape and, over time, public opinions and taste has changed dramatically

The Lombardy poplar, which Hamilton brought to The Woodlands upon his return from England and France in 1784, would become “all the rage” well into the next century. It appears Hamilton used it both as a “terrace shrub” as well as planted out in the landscape. In 1794 Jefferson listed Lombardy poplar among his “Objects for the garden this year,” and the tree’s instantly recognizable, columnar habit is clearly evident in Jane Braddick Peticolas’ famous painting, c. 1825, of the West Front of Monticello. Stephen Sponberg,



JANE BRADDICK PETICOLAS

Monticello c.1825 showing Lombardy Poplars on extreme left.

in *A Reunion of Trees*, describes the rapid-growing, short-lived tree, which is technically a fastigiated form of Northern Italy’s black poplar, as a kind of “fanciful, arboreal exclamation point in the landscape.” It was fancied by so many that John W. Francis, in his reminiscences of New York City, wrote: “In 1800-4 and ‘5, they infested the whole island [of Manhattan], if not most of the middle, northern, and many southern States.”

Popular garden literature during the 19th century was rich with tales of a number of Hamilton’s remarkable trees, and the Lombardy poplar was no exception. In 1861, Robert Carr, nephew of William Bartram and then-owner of the



Bartram's garden and nursery, published an account of Hamilton's introductions in Thomas Meehan's Philadelphia-based periodical magazine, *The Gardener's Monthly*. Carr submitted that William Bartram was actually present for the unpacking of Hamilton's shipment from abroad and that his uncle "informed me that the Lombardy Poplar was one

of the trees, and that he then believed it was the first brought to this country...I believe he brought the European Sycamore Maple...at the same time." Shortly after the publication of Carr's account, William Robert Prince, of the famous Prince family nursery in Flushing, New York, responded in Meehan's journal, claiming that, in

fact, his grandfather, William, introduced Lombardy poplar and had "100,000 growing in his nurseries, which were disseminated far and wide before its propagation was attempted by others." At the least, the Prince Nursery should be credited as one of the first major distributors of the Lombardy poplar.

In the same article, W. R. Prince maintained that it was William Prince who also introduced the *Ailanthus*, which his grandfather had initially sent to the Bartram's Garden "under the erroneous name of 'Tanners' Sumach'." Today Hamilton might be more than willing to offer Prince this dubious distinction and it is gratifying to note that we have no evidence that Jefferson ever grew it. Indeed, it is hard to fathom a

time when this vigorous, rapidly-growing tree, which has now invaded the entire continent with environmentally disruptive consequences, was once pampered in greenhouses and treated as one of the great novelties from The East. Adding to the paradox, William R. Prince's account in Meehan's journal further stated that the sudden mania for this now-maligned



JOSEF BERRY

Ailanthus seeds.

tree might have been due to a mere change of its common name from "Sumach," which he considered repulsive, to "Chinese *Ailanthus*." With this enticing new name, Prince ominously concluded, "a potent charm came over the entire tree, and every one gazed on it with wonder and admiration, and for many years it was impossible to supply the demands at treble the former prices."

But, while we may, in hindsight, have a critical view of Hamilton's choice of the tree-of-heaven, there is no question that another of his Asian introductions, the ginkgo, was truly a prized one. The tree itself has an extraordinary history. Thought to be extinct and known only through fossil records, the ginkgo survived unchanged from the Jurassic Period. This living relic was preserved in Chinese monasteries by Buddhist monks before it was rediscovered in 1691 by the German botanist and physician Engelbert Kaempfer, who was in Japan on a mission for the Dutch East-India Company. The earliest trees raised in Europe appear to have been all male, and the first recorded female tree was found near Geneva in 1814. Hamilton planted two male trees close to the front

of his mansion in 1784, which grew into massive specimens, and sometime later, when is not clear, a female tree was planted nearby.

Long after Hamilton's death in 1813 and the estate incorporated as "The Woodlands Cemetery Company of Philadelphia" in 1840, The Woodlands remained a Mecca for tree enthusiasts. Thomas Meehan's book, *American Handbook of Ornamental Trees*, 1853, which focused primarily on the trees at Bartram's Garden, frequently cited like specimens at The Woodlands; including Hamilton's ginkgo, which he considered the "handsomest." In 1865 the American landscape designer A. J. Downing commented that: "The attention of the visitor to this place [The Woodlands] is now arrested by two very large specimens of that curious tree, the Japanese Ginkgo (*Salisburia*), sixty or seventy feet high, perhaps, the finest in Europe or America." In 1919, Professor Charles Sprague Sargent of the Arnold Arboretum, who knew of the tree only by legend, wrote the following: "It is probable that the first Ginkgo in this country was one planted at Woodlands... This tree if living is certainly one of the most interesting of exotic trees which have been planted in the United States." And, John W. Harshberger, professor of botany at the University of Pennsylvania, verified in 1921 that there remained two trees still in vigorous health, estimating that the largest was about 75 feet tall and 7 feet 7 inches in circumference.

Ginkgo
leaves.

Hamilton's ginkgo, according to Dr. Harshberger, "is still regarded as one of Philadelphia's arboreal treasures, and tree lovers from distant parts of the globe, when in the city, journey to the cemetery to see the magnificent specimen."

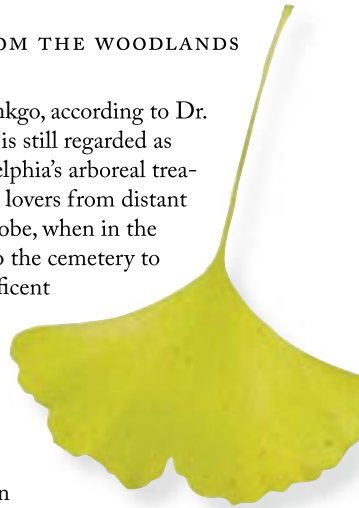
The Woodland's magnificent ginkgos remained in good condition for nearly two hundred years. In 1981 the male ginkgo measured 68 feet tall and 30 inches in diameter and was still in relatively good health. Tragically, in the mid 1980s, a cemetery caretaker cut down the two remaining trees because his dog took sick after eating some of the seeds produced by the female tree. But, at Bartram's Garden, an ancient ginkgo survives

and, according to Joel T. Frey, the garden's curator, family tradition and some scant documentation indicates that this tree came from William Hamilton, possibly as early as 1785.

Although the Hamilton trees were cut, the stumps at The Woodlands are still alive and continue to produce suckers, from which cuttings have been propagated several times in the past two decades.

Visions of Elysium

In April 1800, less than a month before Jefferson would leave Philadelphia for the final time, he paid a visit to The Woodlands and found much to his liking. Jefferson especially fancied the sweet-scented acacias





(*Mimosa farnesiana*) and later requested seed on several occasions. A correspondence ensued for nearly a decade. Although he and Hamilton were on opposite ends of the political spectrum, they had much in common through their mutual love of horticulture – gardening being the great unifier. Both men shared a fundamental curiosity about nature and had similar sensibilities with regard to the creative process of embellishing nature by fancy. Both men were profoundly inspired by Thomas Whately's treatise, *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770), whose striking descriptions of imaginary tours and settings, according to scholar and critic Katja Grillner, "functioned to provide virtual landscapes in which the aesthetic judgment of . . . enthusiastic garden visitors would be exercised." On separate occasions, with Whately as muse, Hamilton and Jefferson toured the English countryside as critical "enthusiastic garden visitors;" Hamilton in 1785, a year prior to Jefferson's more celebrated journey with John Adams. Hamilton's tour was considerably more extensive, but he, unlike Jefferson, left no specific record or diary of his impressions. The impact, nonetheless, was profound, as indicated in a letter Hamilton wrote to his secretary, Mr. Smith, prior to his return to America, detailing his freshly conceived plans for The Woodlands:

"Having observed with attention the nature, variety & extent of the plantations [in England] of shrubs trees & fruits & consequently admired them, I shall (if God grant me a safe return to my own country) endeavour to make it [The Woodlands] smile in the same useful & beautiful manner."

Jefferson obviously recognized this inspiration when he visited The Woodlands years later. In July 1806, as



TJF / CHAD WOLLERTON

Monticello's mimosa in flower.

his impending retirement from public office loomed large in his imagination, Jefferson wrote Hamilton a lengthy theoretical treatise, eloquently expressing his desire to improve his own grounds in the "style of the English gardens," admiring Hamilton's estate as "the only rival which I have known in America to what may be seen in England." Jefferson was reserving this dream of transforming his little mountain for his final occupation upon his return home. The bulk of his essay described his views on the sensible treatment of the native woods, "which are majestic," by trimming up the loftiest trees to produce open ground below while retaining dense shade. His intension was to recreate his experience of the English landscape, which is dependent upon that country's sunless climate, while recognizing that, "under the beaming, constant and almost vertical sun of Virginia, shade is our Elysium." This seminal letter was the basis for Monticello's recreation of Jefferson's grove in 1978.

"Curious trees as will bear our winters"

Jefferson also mentioned his wish to begin "the collection of such curious trees as will bear our winters in the open air." This caveat was not peculiar. As a surge of new introductions from foreign lands and dif-

fering climates were arriving on American shores, the question of a plant's hardiness was a major concern and the act of testing a species' limits became part of the game. Upon his visit to The Woodlands in 1802, François André Michaux (1770-1855), the French plant explorer and son of André, wrote: "[Hamilton's] collection of exotics is immense, and remarkable, for plants from New Holland, all the trees and shrubs of the United States, at least those that would stand the winter in Philadelphia..." In his *Flora Septentrionalis*, Pursh further expanded Michaux's comments in his impressions of Hamilton's collections:

"Not far from [the Bartram's garden and nursery] are also the extensive gardens of William Hamilton, Esq., called The Woodlands, which I found not only rich in plants from all parts of the world, but particularly so in rare and new American species. Philadelphia being a central situation, and extremely well calculated for the cultivation of plants from all the other parts of North America...."

Hamilton's regard for the hardiness of species still new to the eastern North American landscape was often evident, as in his enthusiasm for his precious "silk tree of Constantinople," the mimosa (*Mimosa julibrissin*). In a note accompanying the young tree he sent as a gift to Jefferson in 1805, Hamilton wrote:

"...if well preserved for two or three years in a pot, will afterwards succeed in the open ground. I have trees of 20 feet height which for several years past have produced their beautiful & fragrant flowers & have shewn no marks whatever of suffering from the severity of the last winter."

The following year Hamilton added similar observations about the ginkgo and paper mulberry:

"In the autumn I intend sending you if I live three kinds of trees which I think you will deem valuable to your garden viz – *Ginkgo biloba* or China Maidenhair tree, *Broussonetia papyrifera* vulgarly called paper mulberry tree & *Mimosa julibrissin* or silk tree of Constantinople.



Jefferson's Grove recreated at Monticello.



The first is said...to produce a good eatable nut – the 2nd in the bark as yields a valuable material for making clothing to the people of Otaheite & other South Sea Islands – & the third is a beautiful flowering tree at this time in its highest perfection, the seeds of which were collected on the shore of the Caspian Sea. They are all hardy having for several years past borne our severest weather in the open ground without the smallest protection...”

Jefferson did receive the mimosa seedling Hamilton promised him in 1806, but he declined the paper mulberry, having already gotten two male trees from a neighbor. It is not clear whether Jefferson received the ginkgo, especially since he hoped to defer such gifts of plants for his retirement to Monticello, still three years hence.

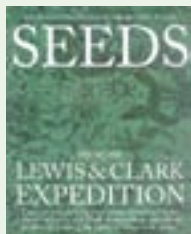
But, Hamilton’s interest in the details of successfully cultivating new introductions, along with his obvious means and resources and his insatiable eagerness for any and every new plant, might explain in part Jefferson’s reasoning when he entrusted Hamilton with a portion of the botanical discoveries of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In January 1807 Jefferson confided to Bernard McMahon that he and Hamilton would be the primary recipients of Governor Lewis’

package of curious treasures from the West, they being the “persons most likely to take care of them.” On March 22, 1807 President Jefferson forwarded to Philadelphia two separate packages, each with similar counsel: “...the packet of seeds are the fruits of [Meriwether Lewis’s] journey across the continent, & will I trust add some useful or agreeable varieties to what we now possess.”

Jefferson’s faith in Hamilton’s horticultural skills might have been overly optimistic in this case, for the next correspondence from The Woodlands came nearly a year later, in February 1808, bearing Hamilton’s report: “Mr. Lewis’s seeds have not yet vegetated freely, more however may come up with this coming spring.” U. P. Hedrick’s *History of Horticulture in America*, may shed light on the fate of Lewis’s seeds with this assertion: “Hamilton...employed the seedsman Landreth to grow plants from the seeds that came to him.” The D. Landreth Seed Company, across the Schuylkill River from the Bartram’s nursery, also reputedly obtained seed and successfully grew the Osage Orange (*Maclura pomifera*), another of the notable finds of the Expedition, and this valuable tree was shortly thereafter being marketed on a massive scale and planted across America to create living fences in rural areas.

Lewis & Clark Plants

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Hamilton’s noble collection

In March 1808, a month after Hamilton’s update, Jefferson wrote his friend a long and chatty letter, covering a variety of new topics, but never mentioning the seeds of the Expedition. Hamilton had inquired about a winter Haw that he’d admired in Washington and Jefferson was intent on determining the identity of the red-berried thorn hedges. Jefferson was also eager for Hamilton to grow his “Aspen from Monticello,” which he described as “a very sensible variety from

G.B. MCINTOSH

*Osage orange.*

any other I have seen in this country, superior in the straitness & paper whiteness of the body; & the leaf is longer in its stem consequently more tremulous, and...smooth (not downy) on its un-

Trees from Monticello

Tulip Poplar

Available as plants.

Osage Orange

Available as seeds.

*Tulip Poplar
in bloom.*



For details and to order, visit our Website:

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derside.” Jefferson concluded by praising Hamilton for the great botanical wealth he had accumulated at The Woodlands, saying “your collection is really a noble one, & in making & attending to it you

have deserved well of your country.”

Jefferson maintained ties to Philadelphia through his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, who had been sent there to study the “particular branches of science, which are not so advantageously taught anywhere else in the United States.” The “schools” Jefferson recommended he attend were: “The garden at the Woodlands for Botany, Mr. Peale’s Museum for Natural History, and [Doctor Caspar Wistar’s] Medical school for Anatomy.” In May 1809, Jefferson asked Hamilton to see that the young man studied well “the style of your pleasure grounds, as the chastest model of gardening which I have ever seen out of England.” Jefferson believed

he himself also had much to learn from Hamilton and he hoped someday to tempt his ailing friend, who suffered from gout, to visit his little mountain, “where I should be very happy to see you & to take from you some of those lessons for the improvement of my grounds which you have so happily practiced on your own.” In that first spring of his retirement, Jefferson could finally begin to focus on developing the particular Elysium he had long conceived at Monticello. As Hamilton had envisioned upon his return from England some twenty-five years earlier, Jefferson wished to make his paradise smile.

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The author is extremely grateful to Robert Cox, Joel T. Frey, Charlotte Landreth-Melville, Timothy Long, Elizabeth McLean, Barb Melera, and Aaron Wunsch for their help in the research and writing of this paper.