

# “The work is very heavy”

## Gardeners at Jefferson’s Monticello

**D**OCUMENTARY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL evidence generally fails in revealing the quality of the horticulture at Monticello 200 years ago: for example, the smoothness of the turf, the vigor of garden plants, or the abundance of weeds and other pests. Statements such as, “It was messier back then,” or, “they had fewer bugs in Jefferson’s time,” may reflect our own modern aesthetic sensibility more than the true quality of early nineteenth century landscape gardening. The nature of the labor in the Monticello fruit, flower, and vegetable gardens evolved dramatically over a long period between 1769, when fruit trees were first planted on the south side of the mountain, until Thomas Jefferson’s death in 1826. Each garden feature also varied in terms of who took care of what. There are no easy generalizations, such as “slaves did all the work,” although they did most of it, or else, “Jefferson did this, and planted that,” a simplistic interpretation that is likely even more flawed. Although garden maintenance at Monticello seemed occasional, sporadic, and sometimes haphazard, gardening intensified when Jefferson returned from public office – whether as Virginia’s Governor, Minister to France, Secretary of State, or President – and he was determined to revive both his ornamental and functional landscape, his gardens and his farms.



*Jefferson’s granddaughter Anne Cary Randolph as a young woman.*

**“Tom has been a man of his honor in respect to the manure”**

The mature flower gardens at Monticello, the winding walk and oval beds installed in 1807 and 1808, were cared for by Jefferson’s granddaughters, especially his oldest, Anne Cary Randolph, and by enslaved African-American Wormley Hughes, some-

times called “Monticello’s Head Gardener.” According to the poignant reminiscence of granddaughter Ellen Randolph Coolidge years after Jefferson’s death, Jefferson himself “directed” the work, spaced bulbs, and labeled the varieties with inscribed wooden stakes. Wormley was “armed with spade and hoe,” preparing the beds for Jefferson’s daughter, Martha, and her two daughters, Anne and Ellen, to do the actual planting. Documentary references suggest that Anne was charged with the responsibility of both directing Wormley to



*Alpine Strawberries*



dig up bulbs and sow seeds, but to water plants and divide and transplant herbaceous flower roots herself. The “Monthly,” or alpine, strawberries, for example, were “put under her care,” probably similarly to other choice plants in the Monticello collection. In 1809, after she’d married and moved away, Jefferson wrote to Anne, “What is to become of our flowers. I left them so entirely to yourself, that I never knew any thing about them, what they are, where they grow, what is to be done for them.”

Reports suggest that the daughter’s and granddaughter’s supervisory role was more challenging than the gardening itself. Bulbs at Monticello were commonly dug up during their dormancy and stored



*Edmund Bacon*

during the summer months for fall replanting. A misstep occurred in 1808 when Anne complained to her grandfather that Wormley had failed to thoroughly scour a bed, so that during the following spring flowers “have come up about in the bed & not in the rows with the others.” The same year, Ellen wrote to Jefferson that Edmund Bacon, the newly appointed overseer at Monticello, when directed to manure the lawn about the house, mistakenly covered it with charcoal: “It is quite black, and is especially dirty to walk on.” Jefferson was compelled to write Bacon himself to “rake and sweep the charcoal into little heaps, and carry them off.” Ellen, in the same letter, also complained about the sheep grazing on the orange trees on the south terrace. Gardening dramas at Monticello often turned into mildly comic tragedy.

Jefferson’s daughter, Martha suggested her dependence on the labor and skill

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of slave gardeners, and her willingness to shrug off ultimate responsibilities for gardening misfortunes, when she wrote her father in 1792: “You will see that I am a much better gardener than last year tho[ugh] in truth old George is so slow that I shall never shine in that way without your assistance.” Two months later, Martha’s confession to her father reflects the illusionary peaks and depressive realities facing any valiant gardener: “What I told you of my garden is really true indeed if you see it at a distance it looks very green but it does not bear close examination, the weeds having taken possession of much the greater part of it.” A gardener’s work is never over, particularly in weeding a 1000-foot-long garden, and Martha added, “Old George is so slow that by the time he has got to the end of his labour he has it all to do over again.” The supervision of slave gardeners may have required delicate negotiation rather than rigid, iron-clad demands. The same year, 1792, Jefferson wrote and asked Martha if Tom Shackleford had spread manure over the vegetable garden: “Shackleford promised me on his honor.” Martha replied affirmatively, that, indeed, Tom had “been a man of his honour with respect to the manure,” suggesting how labor could be delegated through a process that involved playful, mock pleading.

## **Wormley Hughes: “Armed with spade and hoe”**

Wormley Hughes was among the most trusted and dutiful slaves at Monticello. Born at Monticello in March, 1781, the grandson of the African-American matriarch, Betty Hemings, Wormley had many responsibilities aside from gardening. He worked in the Nailery from the age of 1704

until at least 1809, and was considered the “least wasteful” of the youthful nail makers. He dug the “ha-ha’ around the mountaintop along the first Roundabout, cleared and graded several major roads, blasted rock for the construction of the Shadwell canal, and succeeded Jupiter as hostler in the Monticello stables, charged with caring for the horses. “One of the most trusty servants I have,” according to Jefferson, Wormley dug his master’s grave in July, 1826.

Wormley was delegated many skilled horticultural tasks, including the sowing of precious seeds in the Monticello nurseries, collecting and packaging seeds and plants for shipment to Jefferson’s gardening friends, and planting exotic specimen trees around the house. At least two of Wormley’s trees survived well into the twentieth century, including two Purple Beeches, one of which fell in 1950, the other in 1974. Jefferson’s horticultural directives were often written from afar to overseer, Edmund Bacon, or else to Anne or Ellen. Instructions sometimes included the reassuring phrase, “Wormley will do it,” or “Wormley knows where” this or that plant is. Wormley’s propagating skills were expressed in the varied species of seeds he sowed in the nursery, including sesame, peach and cherry stones, ground oak, hickory nuts, cucumber tree, mountain laurel, and assorted grasses. Wormley’s horticultural assignments also involved less delicate tasks than seed propagation or bulb planting; in 1808 he was assigned the role of manuring the entire 1,000-foot-long vegetable garden, “a good wagon load of dung every five yards . . . This will take between 60. & 70. loads in the whole, which will do for the first year.” The commitment was onerous; each wagonload was filled with manure from



*Monticello’s historic beech receiving careful attention in the 1920s.*

Milton, the Rivanna river town three miles and 600 vertical feet away.

Wormley was informally freed by Jefferson’s daughter Martha, but continued to live with, and care for, members of the Jefferson family until his death in 1858. Referred to as “Uncle Wormley,” he nursed Jefferson’s grandson, James M. Randolph, whose sister recalled, “I never saw such a servant as he is. He keeps his room like a picture. Harriet goes in to make his bed twice a day and Wormley does everything else and there is never a spot on the paint or hearth.” As a family confidante, Wormley’s optimistic nature inspired family members to recall his sunny refrain, “I am in no wise discouraged,” when circumstances became particularly bleak. Wormley’s son, Robert Hughes, was founding minister of Union Run Baptist Church at Shadwell; Robert’s son, George, became a church



*Robert Hughes*



deacon; and Fountain Hughes, Wormley's great grandson, furthered the family legacy as a professional gardener as late as 1949.

### **“The work is very heavy”**

The most enduring landscape project, and perhaps the most significant garden undertaking during Jefferson's tenure at Monticello, was the terracing of the 1000-foot-long, 80-foot-wide vegetable garden into what one visitor described as a “hanging garden.” This massive earth-moving project took place between 1806 and 1809 and was carried out by seven to nine slaves that Jefferson leased from a Spotsylvania County farmer. Overseer, Edmund Bacon, supervised the work, which involved carving dirt from the high side of the future garden, manually loading a mule-driven cart and moving the earth to the low side, where a rock wall, in some places fourteen-foot-high and ten-feet deep, retained the unloaded earth. Although Bacon lamented, “The work is very heavy,” the end result was most gratifying: “I think it looks very beautiful,” he exclaimed in 1808 when the terracing was half completed. Jefferson,

tion of cash crops, delayed progress in the leveling of the garden plateau.

Interestingly, a separate crew composed of a European carpenter and three resident Monticello slaves was involved in a parallel and supporting project: the fencing of the six-acre garden and South Orchard below it. Mr. Watkins's first assignment upon arriving at Monticello in September, 1808, was constructing the ten-foot-high paling fence. Davy, Abram, and Shepherd were assigned to work with him: collecting then de-barking twelve-foot-long locust posts; digging post holes; harvesting poplar and pine logs; splitting them into rails and attaching them to the posts; and hammering the pales, or thin boards, to the rails. Although the Spotsylvania County, leased slaves were involved in diverse labors, including the construction of a mill, it's puzzling why Jefferson contracted out the garden leveling while relying on resident labor for the fence work.

### **“For amusement he would work sometimes in the garden...”**

Jefferson's Garden Kalendar, compiled yearly between 1809 and 1824 is so convincingly detailed, with notes about the spacing of seed and the amount allotted to each row, and at least ninety per cent of the Kalendar notations took place when Jefferson was at Monticello, that it suggest he regularly planted the kitchen garden himself. Isaac, a slave blacksmith freed by Martha Jefferson, recalled in 1847, “For amusement he [Jefferson] would work sometimes in the garden for half an hour at a time in right good earnest in the cool of the evening.” Margaret Bayard Smith, a friend of Jefferson's and a chatty chronicler of Washington society, described a portable seed closet used at Monticello, “a frame, or stand, consisting of two upright pieces of about two inches



*Early photo of the Vegetable Garden terrace.*

then serving as President in Washington, often exhorted Bacon to complete the work, “my heart is most set on finishing the garden,” but other essential tasks such as the construction of a mill, the digging of a canal, and the planting and cultiva-





*Tulips blooming along the flower garden walk on the West Lawn.*

thickness, in which were neat little truss hooks. On these were suspended phials of all sizes, tightly corked, and neatly labeled, containing garden seeds, of the smaller kind; those of the larger were in tin canisters. When in his garden this stand could be carried about and placed near him, and if I remember, there must have near a hundred kinds. It is well worthy the adoption of all gentlemen and lady gardeners.”

The image of Jefferson as a “gentleman gardener,” carefully sowing seeds in the freshly cultivated earth, is difficult to reconcile with the picture of him as a manure slinger that he suggests in a letter to his daughter, Martha, in 1793. After she complained of pest damage to her plantings in the kitchen garden, Jefferson replied, “We will try this winter to cover our garden with a heavy coating of manure. When earth is rich it bids defiance to droughts, yields in abundance, and of the best quality. I suspect that the insects which have harassed you have been encouraged by the feebleness of your plants;

and that has been produced by the lean state of the soil. We will attack them another year with joint efforts.”

### “Old George is so slow”

Although one might presume Wormley Hughes worked in the Monticello Kitchen Garden, there are few documentary references to him performing any task other than spreading manure. Other slave gardeners, such as Isaac’s father, Great George, Gardener John, Tom Shackleford, and Goliah periodically toiled in the kitchen garden. George (1730-1799), a larger than life figure at Monticello, worked in the orchards and vineyards while Jefferson was in Paris as Minister of France and was among the handful of Monticello slaves not leased to neighboring farmers. George, a skilled blacksmith, also helped Martha Jefferson in the kitchen garden during the 1790’s, and while she complained that “Old George is so slow,” he soon rose to the role of overseer, the most responsible position on the farm. In



plant them. He would do well perhaps to dig his holes beforehand, to mellow the earth. All the trees to be well staked, the number preserved.” The order included a sugar maple that Jefferson wanted planted on the south side of the West Lawn. This tree survived into the twentieth century, when it was described as one of the best examples of its species in the United States. Toppled by tornado-like winds in 1994, the “original” sugar maple was an enduring testament to the skills of at least one slave gardener at Monticello.

Goliah (1731 – 1810) followed John in the garden. From the President’s House in Washington, Jefferson announced to his daughter Maria, “Goliah is our gardener, and with his veteran aids will be directed to make what preparations he can for you.” Goliah was the only slave gardener with assistants, who were also referred to as the “senile corps.” The garden seemed a likely refuge for laborers unfit for laboring over a cash crop of tobacco or wheat.

## Gardeners as Classical Musicians

Jefferson had a boundless faith in classical culture. His personal library included what was considered the finest collection of Greek and Latin books in the young United States, and his vision of the American, agrarian paradise was based on his admiration for the integration of art, intellect, labor, and nature found in the pastoral landscapes of Virgil, Ovid, and others. He transferred this classical devotion to, at least in Jefferson’s imagination, a deep respect for the well rounded citizens of late nineteenth-century Italian culture. This sparked an idea, idealistic yet naïve, of importing Italian workmen who could also form a musical orchestra. Jefferson wrote Giovanni Fabbroni in 1778 with a plan for a clever “twofer”:

“The bounds of an American fortune will not admit the indulgence of a domes-

tic band of musicians, yet I have thought a passion for music might be reconciled with that economy which we are obliged to observe. I retain for instance among my domestic servants a gardener, a weaver, a cabinet maker and a stone cutter, to which I would add a vigneron. In a country where like yours music is cultivated and practiced by every class of men I suppose there might be found persons of those trades who could perform on the French horn, clarinet or hautboy & bassoon, so one might have a band of two French horns, two clarinets, & hautboys & a bassoon, without enlarging their domestic expenses.”

Curiously, at this time Jefferson was employing an Italian gardener, Anthony Giannini, who had arrived in Virginia in 1773 with a group of Italian farmers and artisans led by Jefferson’s future friend, Philip Mazzei, an experimental agriculturist, political writer, and American soldier. Mazzei and his band of Italian workers were on their way to the Shenandoah Valley to purchase and establish a farm when they were waylaid by Jefferson, who persuaded Mazzei to settle on land adjacent to Monticello. Mazzei’s Italians planted ambitious vineyards, but he left Charlottesville to aid the American effort in the Revolutionary war. His workmen also disbanded, and Giannini came to work at Monticello, where he budded fruit trees, managed the young vineyard, planted the North Orchard with apple trees, and collected seeds of native plants, such as the umbrella magnolia and wild turk’s cap lilies, for the gardens and for shipment to Jefferson in Paris. Giannini worked regularly in the fruit gardens of Monticello between 1778, when he planted hundreds of trees in the South Orchard, and 1786, and was especially relied upon during Jefferson’s absence and tenure as Minister to France. His work became more spo-



radic upon Jefferson's return in 1791, but he contracted for occasional skilled work, grafting and budding fruit trees and planting choice grape vines.

Giannini's ultimate fate may have been troubled, as Jefferson observed in a letter that after thriving as an Albemarle County farmer, he "has become embarrassed and little esteemed." Nonetheless, his descendents thrive today in central Virginia, and often recall Anthony's service at Monticello. Another Italian workman that gardened at Monticello as a result of the Mazzei residency was Giovannini di Prato, who was paid wages in 1781 and 1782: as much as 600 pounds of pork and 291 pounds in cash. Jefferson described him as "sober, industrious, and honest," yet by 1799 Giovannini was "sickly and miserably poor." Thirteen years later, however, Jefferson was still paying for Giovannini's work in the vineyards.

The Fruit Garden may also have been the primary workplace of another European professional gardener, Robert Bailey, a Scotsman who worked for three years at Monticello during the 1790's, following Jefferson's return from France. Bailey was paid fifteen pounds cash, along with 500 pounds of pork and "bread for his family," for a year's service. A list of the seeds of forty-two vegetable varieties saved from the growing season of 1794, and a road through the South Orchard, "Bailey's alley," perhaps because he lived there with his family, are his chief Monticello legacies. Bailey moved to Washington, D.C. around 1797 and tried to establish a commercial nursery. Jefferson asked him to grow weekly supplies of endive through the winter for the President's House table, and Bailey was a regular supplier of woody plants that were shipped by Jefferson to Madame de Tesse, an old and dear friend in Paris. Jefferson's



*The Vineyard.*

patronage, however, wasn't enough to support Bailey, who died in poverty of "bilious fever" in 1804.

The impoverished fate of the three European gardeners at Monticello and the sporadic role slave gardeners played in the documented Monticello garden suggests how horticultural maintenance, for whatever reason, may never have complemented or enhanced Jefferson's idealized vision for the landscape. Jefferson wrote Philadelphia portrait painter Charles Willson Peale in 1811, "If heaven had given me choice of my position and calling, it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered, and near a good market for the productions of the garden." Notwithstanding Jefferson's personal fantasy of becoming a market gardener and his quirky vision of the gardener as a well-rounded artist-craftsman, despite his own playful delight in the process of gardening and the presumed pride he took in the unfolding of his plans for the landscape, Jefferson's most beautiful garden, as Henry Mitchell, the iconoclastic garden writer for the Washington Post observed, was the garden of his imagination. In many ways, however, Mitchell's candid appraisal is universal among brothers and sisters of the spade.

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