

William Hamilton and His “Woodlands”

THERE are few early examples in America of “Romantic” or “landscape” gardening. The gardens of the colonists were, for the most part, simple; a few were laid out in elegant, even elaborate fashion, but the artificialities and absurdities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not carried out to the same extreme as they were in England and in France.

The Romantic style was a reform, a phase in the movement against too stilted, formalized conventions in art, literature, and gardening; there was very little to reform on the simple American estates. Here and there a returned traveler to Europe might introduce a few of the more striking elements of the new style—Mrs. Pinckney,¹ on her return to South Carolina in 1758 did renovate the ruins of her former garden in the new manner, and there were other gardens which incorporated some of the features—but no very large or sweeping changes were carried out in America until after the Revolution.

One reason for this was that Romanticism, although deceptively simple in finished appearance, was expensive to undertake. The old style had stressed geometric form, within definite confines; the new stressed irregularity on a broad scale, with wild and rugged backgrounds, carefully manufactured views, jagged masses of rock, sham ruins, imitations of decayed antiquity. A description, written in England in 1750, gives the effect upon the beholder of this studied struggle for the picturesque.²

Of all that I have yet seen, and I have seen almost everything, Mr. Anson’s place captivates the most . . . beautiful house and river; grounds well disposed; Chinese buildings and bridges; a church-like pigeon house; excellent modern ruins.—He has erected a pile of broken arches, and of imperfect pillars, to counterfeit the remains of

¹ Eliza Lucas Pinckney (1723-1793), wife of Chief Justice Charles Pinckney of South Carolina.

² George Hardinge, “Biographical Memoirs of The Rev. Sneyd Davis, D. D.,” in John Nichols’ *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1817), I, 639.

antiquity. The architect could not perform *his* part satisfactorily without finishing the whole. Then comes Mr. Anson with axes and chissels to demolish as much of it as taste and judgment claimed.

The last sentence is an epitome of the whole style; it was, in effect, an attempt to show Nature how she really should go about the making of a pleasing landscape; it required men, money, and time to accomplish.

William Hamilton³ of Philadelphia had all the requisites. Somewhat lukewarm toward complete independence, he took little part in the Revolution, and departed for Europe as soon as possible after the war. There he visited numerous estates, saw some of the most outstanding examples of Romanticism, and was inspired to start afresh on his own property, to make of it a show place in the picturesque style which had so captivated his fancy. In methodical and careful fashion he set about the accomplishment of this, noting in painstaking detail all the necessary steps in the raising of plants, for such a scheme required thousands of trees, shrubs, and perennials, in quantity and size alike impossible to purchase in the American nurseries. It would be interesting to learn of the reactions of his English hosts to his persistent, genial inquiries and requests; the gardeners he must have won over early, for he not only secured from them plenty of slips and seeds, but his information became both encyclopedic and unusually correct.

When at last he arrived home, "in good health and pleased with his tour,"⁴ he was ready to add the necessary and characteristic touches to gain his effects. The house, built on the banks of the Schuylkill, was in the classic style then coming into vogue. It fronted, according to custom, in two directions—the river entrance had a great pillared porch, or piazza, well-furnished with chairs and sofas, a convenient and luxurious lounging place in warm weather; the land entrance was stately, the more formal of the two.

The pleasure grounds surrounded the house. Hamilton had taken skillful advantage of the natural contours of the land. There were many of the usual winding paths bordered by shrubs; green lawns

³ William Hamilton (1745-1813), second son of Andrew Hamilton, Attorney General of the Province of Pennsylvania.

⁴ Thomas Parke to Humphrey Marshall, September 4, 1786. Dreer Collection, Humphrey Marshall's Correspondence, I, 32, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

were kept in what was then a high state of perfection by frequent mowing and trimming. Views, carefully manipulated, so framed in shrubbery as to take full advantage of the proper laws of perspective, were located at the proper unexpected points along the paths. Most prized of these was a distant sight of the city of Philadelphia, a prospect which included a selected bit of river, and a creek with a natural outcropping of rock along its bank—this to provide the necessary wild touch.

In his early enthusiasm he had tried, even before returning home, to improve the prospect on lands other than his own, giving specific details for the planting of ivy on a near-by bridge, to lend the proper and picturesque aging touch to that new structure. He did suggest that the owner be found and consulted, although he was sure no objection could be made to such obvious improvements; the ivy would do no harm—a touching, but somewhat unjustifiable belief.⁵

Every tree, every shrub used on his estate was selected with the greatest of care; in some sections only native growth was used, in others, native and exotic were blended. Even the scent and general size and shape of such details as leaves came in for studied consideration before the composition was arranged; more than one visitor was impressed by the “rich foliage” and “balmy odors” along the way.⁶

The hermitages, ruined pillars, and tottering towers, which intrigued so many followers of the Romantic style, evidently did not appeal to Hamilton as much as the exotics—those unusual trees and shrubs used either in the landscape itself, or raised in a greenhouse for greater approximation of their native conditions. In a day when one small greenhouse or “stove” was enough to mark the owner as a dilettante gardener, the range of glass at Hamilton’s disposal was impressive; it was the ultimate in luxurious display. Jefferson at Monticello could boast only of a porch for a few orange trees⁷; Hamilton had one hundred and forty feet of specially built structure, a vast undertaking in the way of heating alone, with the crude

⁵ Benjamin H. Smith, “Some Letters from William Hamilton, of The Woodlands, to his Private Secretary,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (PMHB), XXIX (1905), 75.

⁶ *Port Folio*, II (December, 1809), 505.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson to William Hamilton, March 1, 1808. Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Edwin M. Betts, *Thomas Jefferson’s Garden Book* (Philadelphia, 1944), 366.

methods then employed. Inside, in different compartments, the collection of exotics was arranged in careful order, a collection which could, at its peak, number ten thousand plants.

These exotics were the product of much patient search; they came from the East Indies, from Botany Bay, Japan, the Cape of Good Hope. Hamilton spared no pains to make his display supreme both in rarity and in the geographical extent it represented. No wonder the untraveled visitor was more impressed by these evidences of wealth than by the grounds, unusual though they might be. "The curious person views it with delight, the naturalist quits it with regret"⁸ sums up perfectly the reaction it compelled. Hamilton himself was fully aware of its attractions to the public; his orders were that the greenhouse area should be kept in a state of especial neatness, for it would be, of all the grounds, most frequently on parade.

He was generous with admission to this fine estate of "The Woodlands" that he had created. "Every genteel stranger"⁹ who applied for admission found a ready welcome; if botanically minded as well, he received enthusiastic greeting. There was a flock of nieces and nephews and other young people to make things lively, an elderly mother to lend dignity; with their assistance the bachelor Hamilton kept open house in the most lavish manner.

And the visitors came, in large numbers, and from various stations in life. Washington visited Hamilton many times, but at "Bush Hill," another family estate. He was, however, exceedingly interested in Hamilton's early accounts of his operations at "The Woodlands," especially in the colored cement used in one portion of the building. Washington was then improving Mt. Vernon, and he was eager for any information on cement and stucco which his friends might give him.¹⁰

Jefferson, however, did visit "The Woodlands," after it had reached a high state of perfection. He not only admired, he asked for seeds, and he hinted more than once in his letters for certain unknown plants which his observing eyes had noted in the greenhouse.¹¹

⁸ *Port Folio*, II (December, 1809), 505.

⁹ James Mease, *The Picture of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1811), 26.

¹⁰ George Washington to Samuel Vaughan, January 14, 1784; Washington to William Hamilton, January 15 and April 6, 1784. John C. Fitzpatrick, *The Writings of George Washington* (Washington, 1938), XXVII, 297-299, 303, 388.

¹¹ Thomas Jefferson to William Hamilton, April 22, 1800. W. C. Ford, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1896), 442.

Hamilton sent the seeds, and finally the desired shrub, and even offered him a ginkgo—a distinct and unusual mark of esteem.¹²

Hamilton loved to display his treasures; he rejoiced in their praise. A visiting celebrity in the botanical line did not often come his way, but when one did, there was no appropriate entertainment which he did not offer. Manasseh Cutler,¹³ who was, in addition to his many other interests, a gardener and botanist, was traveling on one occasion near Philadelphia. He had hoped to find a night's lodging at Gray's Ferry, but it was full, so at the insistence of his traveling companion—for he himself was unwilling to impose himself upon a complete stranger—he went on, hesitantly, to "The Woodlands."

It was almost dusk when the two men arrived. Hamilton was sitting with his cigar on the porch, looking out over the river. On learning the identity of his guest, his enthusiasm knew no bounds. He grasped Cutler's hand in what that gentleman called "a pretty hard squeeze,"¹⁴ hustled him directly into the house for refreshment—which the protesting doctor had great difficulty in refusing—reproached him for never coming that way before, mapped out an excursion around the grounds, all in one breath, as rapidly as he could force the words from his lips.

Cutler, in spite of his satisfaction in being thus a guest at one of the most magnificent estates in America and his anticipation in the botanical delights to come, was far from comfortable. He had been wretchedly ill all day. For a few moments he was able to follow his effervescing host around the numerous paths, half-forgetting his pain, but he was soon obliged to stop. Hamilton was willing to forgo displaying the grounds, only half seen, but the greenhouse with its thousands of specimens was an entirely different matter. He led his now exhausted guest around that enclosure until it became so dark that nothing could be seen.

Opportune relief, in the shape of wine and tea, appeared; a short pause was made for these refreshments, then immediate preparation began for further scientific entertainment—this time, fortunately for the visitor, inside the house. A large number of botanical books were set out, books well-illustrated, finely compiled. This was a treat not

¹² William Hamilton to Thomas Jefferson, July 7, 1806. Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Betts, 270, 332.

¹³ Manasseh Cutler (1724–1823), clergyman, botanist, colonizer, congressman.

¹⁴ William P. and Julia P. Cutler, *Life, Journals and Correspondence of Rev. Manasseh Cutler* (Cincinnati, 1888), II, 144.

unmixed with agony for the unfortunate Cutler; he sat with lips tight pressed, torn between his pleasure at the sight of so many treasures, and his extreme pain; it was only with the greatest difficulty that he could suppress his groans.

Hamilton was now in his element. As soon as any picture appeared for which Cutler either expressed admiration or unfamiliarity, a gardener was called, a lantern lit, and the man dispatched to the greenhouse to bring back the living plant for triumphant display. This incident occurred time after time, until finally, at about eleven o'clock, a halt was called, and "an elegant table was spread with no less than 20 covers."¹⁵ But this was only a short respite. After the food had been dispatched, the books were brought out again. It was one in the morning when the company at last got to bed. Cutler, by this time quite worn out with pain and pleasure, was obliged to take a dose of opium to induce sleep.

He arose at daybreak to continue his journey, but Hamilton was not to be taken by surprise. He was waiting downstairs, the servants in the midst of breakfast preparation, and only on their solemn assurance that they would miss the stage if they lingered, would he allow the two men to depart. Even then he obliged them first to examine and admire the contents of the entire house.

Hamilton not only kept his collections in a state of high perfection, he added to them continually. For several years Pursh¹⁶ was his superintendent, and kept his employer well supplied with American plants. Jefferson thought first of Hamilton when dividing the Lewis and Clark spoils, for no other person except Bernard M'Mahon, the Philadelphia seedsman, writer, and botanical expert, had the enthusiasm and the knowledge to grow unknown and difficult seeds.¹⁷

There was considerable basis for Hamilton's boast that there was no rare plant in the world which he did not procure for his greenhouse, once he had heard the description; the variety he could show certainly bore him out. There is a suspicion that he sometimes considered rarity and unattainability more important than actual botanic merit, for he assembled live specimens and seeds and roots as men today do stamps—single-mindedly and with avidity. He is

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Frederick Pursh (1744-1820), botanist and explorer.

¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson to William Hamilton, November 6, 1805, and March 22, 1807; Jefferson to Bernard M'Mahon, March 22, 1807. Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Betts, 307, 344.

credited with making several first introductions, and has the dubious honor of bringing the Lombardy poplar to America. Tea bushes, spice plants, ginkgoes were in his collection, plants which the average gardener had never seen. Jefferson justly remarked that "The Woodlands," with its collections, its taste, and its style, was "the only rival which I have known in America to what may be seen in England."¹⁸

Not only was the owner of all this extremely proud, he was also extremely miserly with it. He might send seeds or plants to Jefferson or Marshall,¹⁹ but he made no general practice of such giving. M'Mahon complained that while he had often sent Hamilton specimens, he had never been offered one in return. However much he might long for seeds of choice peculiarities growing at "The Woodlands," he did not have the courage to ask for them outright; such temerity would lose him a friendship which he valued. "I well know his jealousy of any person who attempts to vie with him in a collection of plants," the disconsolate nurseryman wrote Jefferson.²⁰

One covetous young lady who paid a visit to the estate complained bitterly that she was not offered even a single leaf from the abundance she saw at "The Woodlands," but there may have been good reason for such treatment. When the rage for camellias was just starting in America, Hamilton got himself a fine specimen. It was carefully tended. The first flower came to perfection just at the date of one of those large parties in which he so delighted; it was designated as a centerpiece for the table. Just before it was to make its appearance, Hamilton himself went to the greenhouse to make sure everything was proceeding properly. On his way he met a charming young girl, who stopped him to display to his horrified eyes the flower she had just found—the camellia, stripped by her only a moment before from its bush.

It is a matter of regretful record that Hamilton swore at the lady. "I had rather," he said angrily, "given you one hundred guineas than that you should have plucked that precious blossom."²¹ For this remark the journals of the day seemed to think Hamilton no gentleman; gallantry should have allowed the lady, "the fairer flower of the

¹⁸ Thomas Jefferson to William Hamilton, July, 1806. *Ibid.*, 323.

¹⁹ Humphrey Marshall (1722-1801), botanist and writer.

²⁰ Bernard M'Mahon to Thomas Jefferson, January 3, 1809. Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Betts, 401.

²¹ "The Rare Trees and Pleasure Grounds of Pennsylvania. By a Massachusetts Subscriber," *The Horticulturist*, VI (1851), 129.

two," any liberty she chose. The writers failed to realize that genuine collectors are not noted for their liberality with any but unconsidered trifles; the real wonder is that the lady ever got as far as the sacred spot in which the rarity was kept, for strict orders had been given that the hothouses be kept under lock and key, and no one allowed to remain alone in the enclosure. The owner knew full well the temptation to snip a leaf for home propagation, or to describe for the first time a hitherto unknown plant. The avarice of the collector is unlimited; Hamilton's chief regret, on the unavailing trip of his secretary to secure a new plant, was that it might be the pride of another large estate.²²

If William Hamilton's collections were the envy of his friends, his skill as a designer was also recognized as of the first rank. Jefferson openly regretted that it seemed impossible for the Philadelphian to come to Virginia and give him advice on the laying out of grounds; he hinted that Hamilton's gout might be benefited by a visit to the hot springs—with a long stop on the way for the benefit of Monticello.²³ Again, lauding Hamilton's taste and knowledge as a practitioner of Romantic gardening, Jefferson proceeded to give a pretty thorough account of that art from his own viewpoint, although he did have the grace to be amused at his thus instructing its foremost American exponent.²⁴

With Hamilton's death in 1813, "The Woodlands," this "chastest model of gardening,"²⁵ fell from its high position. Although for a time the estate was kept up, it soon lost the polished state of perfection into which its maker had brought it. Finally, collections were dispersed, trees cut, and the land became a cemetery. It was long before anything on such a grand scale equalled it, and there was considerable truth in the remark of a Philadelphia visitor in 1824, that "ornamental gardening is an art at present totally unknown, or at least, unpracticed, in the United States."²⁶

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²² *PMHB*, XXIX (1905), 264.

²³ Thomas Jefferson to William Hamilton, May 7, 1809. Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Betts, 411.

²⁴ Thomas Jefferson to William Hamilton, July, 1806. *Ibid.*, 323-324.

²⁵ Thomas Jefferson to William Hamilton, May 7, 1809. *Ibid.*, 411.

²⁶ W. N. Blane, *An Excursion through the United States and Canada during the Years 1822-1823* (London, 1824), 30.