

The Garden at TUCKAHOE PLANTATION

by
Ian Robertson

Photos by Hannah Warfield

Tuckahoe framed by heirloom daffodils -- a show repeated for over a 100 years.



Wars and natural disasters occur throughout the history of all countries, and America is no exception. Yet for 276 years, Tuckahoe Plantation weathered all these challenges and remained the most complete example of an early 18th century plantation in America. It stands much as it always has on the north bank of the James River a few miles west of the Richmond city limits.

The casual front lawn and the



understated walk bordered by jonquils and other narcissus leading up to the Georgian home create a timeless atmosphere. “The jonquils have given fragrant pleasure for more than 100 springs,” suggests our enthusiastic and knowledgeable garden host, Hannah Warfield. Encompassing the duties of assistant head gardener, coordinator, Tuckahoe official Web site designer and informative host, she handles it all with a cheerful disposition.

The property has been under the conscientious and caring guardianship of Addison Baker (Tad) Thompson and his wife Sue since the late 1970s when the couple took over on behalf of their family trust. Previously, the Randolphs, followed by the Allens, then the Coolidges of Boston, had shepherded Tuckahoe up to 1935, when Thompson’s grandmother, Isabelle Ball Baker, took up the reins. Today the Thompsons are the gracious and consummate

guiding light for the gardens.

The famous Boston landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff, who later went on to guide the historic reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg, and Fletcher Steel, Harvard-trained creator of the neoclassical Naumkeag gardens in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, were involved with the evolution of the plantation’s grounds.

We were escorted to the south corner of the house to view a decrepit honey



The setting sun paints the venerable old hackberry and adjacent crape myrtles.

locust. Warfield commented on how this shows the thoughtful nature of the Thompsons. “Most people would have removed this piece of history by now. But left as it is, its hollow trunk became the perfect child’s hideout.” Maintaining a single strip of living transporting tissue allows a small enthusiastic collection of shoots to reach skyward. Surrounded by grand trees such as this locust, the question had to be asked —which is the oldest specimen?

Surely this honey locust was a fine upstanding tree watching over the Coolidge and Randolph family reunion party held on April 19, 1900. The train from Richmond arrived at the small Tuckahoe stop, bringing several hundred family members and

The old honey locust waiting for a young explorer (Photo by Ian Robertson)



friends. The railroad, built during the 1800s, ran well below the house along the Kanawha Canal, which was completed in 1789. Visitors meandered pleasantly up the grass slope, now cleared woodland, to be greeted and lavishly entertained. During the speeches it was noted that the resident peacock gave out its singular thoughts about the speakers, much to the amusement of the audience.

We were ushered through the welcoming white gate to the garden proper and along the Ghost Walk lined by American boxwoods. To the left are extensive flower and vegetable beds, and next is the site of the parterre/maze that was recently removed. A clear area of grass encompassed by more specimen American

boxwood lay ahead. Once, English boxwoods were found here, enclosing some 57 interior beds planted with colorful perennial flowers. Sadly, the boxwood decline caused the demise of this major historic feature.

Looking out onto this old boxwood parterre area is the original school house where Thomas Jefferson was given his first seven years of formal education. Young Jefferson found himself at the Tuckahoe house due to the death of the Randolphs, the plantation's owners at the time. Their good friend, Peter Jefferson of Shadwell, moved with his family to Tuckahoe as guardian to the four orphaned Randolph children. For seven years Thomas Jefferson was soaked in the atmosphere of Tuckahoe. Did the interior domed school room ceiling in Tuckahoe inspire the Palladian roof at Monticello? Did the orderly layout of Plantation Street in some way sow the seed for Monticello's Mulberry Row?

The Jeffersons returned home to Shadwell in 1752. By then the oldest Randolph son, then 11, was deemed ready to take over the running of the plantation. Joseph Allen purchased Tuckahoe in 1850. He was a fine plantation record-keeper and developed considerable notation of farming activities. He noted that 7,000 to 8,000 pounds of bacon and 256 barrels of corn were required to keep the plantation family and more than 55 slaves in food for a year. Thus we can imagine the need for the extensive vegetable garden mentioned above to augment and provide some variety to the family diet.

Mrs. Virginia Allen had a particular place in Tuckahoe's history. During the Civil War, Union Colonel Ulric Dahlgren was advancing towards Richmond, burning properties in his path. Directly in his path lay Tuckahoe, when the forewarned Mrs. Allen, attired in her finest dress over which she had strapped two pistols, advanced onto her front lawn to confront the enemy. Fortunately Dahlgren recognized her from



The compact Charles Gillette-designed memorial garden, with a forget-me-not carpet below the classic crape myrtle trunks

The last of the season's roses partnered with the brilliance of crape myrtles





Popular white peonies enhanced by the surrounding dark foliage

The mixed vegetable and flower garden, showing traditional tripod vine supports and traditional glass bell jar plant protectors for early spring forcing



earlier West Point balls that both had attended, so he relented and instead entered the house for a cup of tea, while his troops watered their horses outside.

Thank you, Virginia Allen, for attending those military balls and charming the colonel, so that today we can still walk Plantation Street. This street contains the original plantation office and storehouse, slave quarters and stables. The kitchen building was modified, probably around 1820, while the charming herb garden was added in the 1980s. In the earlier times, Plantation Street must surely have been the center of plantation activity.

A memorable experience is to enter the classic 1740s Great Hall or saloon of the manor house, which is luxuriously paneled in wood with exquisite carving and graced by a delightful staircase. The floor plan has an unusual “H” layout with an original grand entrance door at each elevation — a definite advantage as the heat of the summer is alleviated somewhat by wafting



The long plantation drive lined with old cedars
(Photo by Ian Robertson)

air through these open doors.

As we depart, moving down the straight, mile-long drive lined with old cedars, it is reassuring to know that the present owners have these 350 acres, including the house and all its historic dependencies, under a conservation easement.

Many thanks to the *Goochland County Historical Society Magazine* (Volume 18, 1986), to the Addison Baker Thompson notes in the aforementioned, and to the kindness of Sue Thompson and Hannah Warfield for their hospitality and consummate knowledge.

Visit the Web site for Tuckahoe Plantation, www.tuckahoeplantation.com, for more information, and visiting times.

Ian Robertson is the president of the landscape design company Ian Robertson Ltd. He is a contributor to the PBS radio series *With Good Reason*. He regularly lectures throughout the area on garden history and related subjects including biodiversity.

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