

WHAT DID GOVERNOR SIR WILLIAM BERKELEY DO DURING HIS 1652-1660) “RETIREMENT”

Forced out of office in 1652, and replaced by a series of Puritan Governors approved by Oliver Cromwell’s regime in London, Governor Sir William Berkeley spent eight years in retirement from Virginia politics until his recall to power by newly-restored King Charles II in 1660. During this hiatus, focused much of his energy upon improving his expanding plantation at Green Spring, and especially upon agricultural experiments designed to develop new cash crops that he and his neighbors could sell overseas.

Berkeley’s efforts at agricultural diversification program at Green Spring pre-dated his “retirement,” as evidenced by a 1649 letter which noted that Berkeley was already producing a small rice crop, and that “...The Governour in his new orchard hath 1500 fruit-trees, besides his Apricocks, Peaches, Mellicotons, Quinces, Wardens (winter pears) and such like fruit.” At least four likely botanical descendants of these orchard trees can still be seen flowering in early Spring on the HGS site to this day.

According to M. Kent Brinkley’s new book on the probable evolution of the domestic landscape at Green Spring , during his “retirement” years Berkeley “...turned Green Spring into an experimental farm by producing lumber, flax, potash, hemp, silk, and rice. However...he was unsuccessful in weaning his fellow planters away from growing tobacco, largely because they did not possess the financial resources or the luxury of experimentation that the Governor obviously did.” In a similar vein, Professor Warren Billings has concluded that “But for a mere handful of wealthy Virginians, few of Berkeley’s fellow planters matched his fortune, his knowledge, his network of markets, and sources of skilled laborers, let alone his resolute commitment to diversifying the Virginia economy.”

Berkeley went on to serve as Virginia’s Governor for another seventeen years. In spite of efforts to find profitable alternative exports, tobacco continued as Virginia’s dominant cash crop (indeed, frequently substituting for “cash” in legal, tax, and business transactions) for more than a century. As the Colony’s tobacco plantations grew in size, the demand for a larger, more exploitable agricultural labor force led Virginia’s planters to begin the large-scale importation of African slaves, which by 1705 resulted in the development of institutionalized chattel slavery.

**For more detailed discussions of this topic, see: Warren M. Billings. “Sir William Berkeley and the Diversification of the Virginia Economy,” in The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Vol 104, no. 4 (Autumn, 1996), and M. Kent Brinkley, The Green Spring Plantation Greenhouse/Orangery And the Probable Evolution of the Domestic Area Landscape. A research report prepared for the Colonial National Historical Park, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, December, 2003.*