

GREEN SPRING PLANTATION: AN HISTORICAL SUMMARY

In the spring, thousands of daffodils blow in the breeze over level fields a few miles north of Jamestown Island. Who would guess that, over three centuries ago, this land was the site of a stately governor's mansion and an experimental agricultural center? Green Spring, the site of Governor William Berkeley's mansion and estate, has been protected by the National Park Service since 1966. The 300-odd acres, punctuated today by only a few gnarled trees and a crumbling brick ruin, have a unique story to tell, making them a nationally significant site.

The first permanent English settlement in the New World was established in May 1607 at Jamestown. Though their early struggles were painful and arduous, the settlers persevered and, by the 1640's, the colony of Virginia was considered a successful endeavor. Tobacco had proven to be a viable cash crop; the colony was attracting new settlers to swell the ranks of those who had already established footholds on this new frontier.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the position of Governor of Virginia was a prize any young nobleman in London might hope to win. After he aggressively lobbied for the position, Sir William Berkeley was the man chosen by Charles I to come to Virginia as her next governor in 1641. He would play a vital role in the political, social and economic history of Virginia for nearly four decades.

The Berkeley family had been important both at court and in the army since the Norman Conquest in 1066. They had earlier lent support to the Virginia venture as well; Sir Maurice Berkeley was an original member of the Virginia Company of London which was formed in 1606 to establish a settlement in the New World. His son William was born two years later. William Berkeley graduated from Oxford in 1629, traveled abroad for a year and eventually became a gentleman of the privy chamber of Charles I. Knighted in 1639, he accepted the Governorship of Virginia two years later at the age of 37.

As Royal Governor, Sir William was granted 984 acres of land designated "by name of Green Spring" in June 1643. By the 1660's, the total property's size had increased to 2,090 acres. The house and estate were named for a mossy spring which a visitor in the 1680's described as "so very cold that 'twas dangerous drinking the water thereof in Summer-time." An additional 3,000-acre tract bordering the western boundary of Green Spring was set aside as "Governor's land" and was for the use of Berkeley while he remained in office.

Doubtless Sir William began construction of his mansion shortly after he acquired Green Spring; by 1649, his home was built and he was entertaining on a fairly lavish scale. The massive dwelling was seated on a high natural terrace, facing Jamestown. Although the brick house no longer survives, archeological evidence indicates a structure nearly 97 feet long and 25 feet wide, consisting of a row of three rooms and an ell of one room extending another 25 feet on the west end. The 28-inch-thick foundation walls suggest a second story, which a sketch from the late 18th century confirms. All in all, it was a massive and imposing structure; Lady Frances Berkeley described her home in 1677 as "the finest seat in America & the only tollerable place for a Govenour ..."

By the end of his first tenure as Royal Governor, Berkeley was both liked and respected by Virginians. He recognized their priorities and quickly made them his own, integrating them neatly with Crown instructions. Although his attempts to aid Virginia were not always successful, he proved he had the best interest of both his king and the colony at heart.

Defense, both from the Native Americans and non-English Europeans, was a primary concern for the colonists. Berkeley addressed the problem by supporting the establishment of forts both on the coast and at the falls of several major rivers. Each fort was staffed by a small armed force, which could be augmented if needed. His reservation system--the second oldest in the North American Colonies--was designed to protect friendly Virginian Native American tribes and create a buffer zone separating English settlements from hostile tribes to the west. It facilitated trading as well.

Berkeley also sought to stabilize the economy of Virginia. Tobacco had proven to be a profitable cash crop, but it had its drawbacks. It quickly depleted the soil of nutrients and was very labor-intensive. Worse for the economy, the plantations were soon producing an overabundance of tobacco, glutting the market and bringing down prices. In addition, inferior tobacco often contaminated shipments, making them nearly valueless.

To solve these problems, Sir William modified the instructions he had received from the Crown to better suit the needs of the planters and the conditions in the colony. He attempted to find other European markets, regulate the amount of tobacco each planter was permitted to grow and diversify the crops raised in Virginia. While all these attempts met with only limited success, he proved to the planters that his administration had their welfare in mind.

As a planter, Berkeley practiced what he preached at Green Spring. He aided the colony by using his lands as a kind of experimental station to attempt diversification of crops grown in Virginia. In addition to tobacco, Sir William raised cotton, flax, hemp and rice. He planted thousands of fruit trees; a contemporary commented on Sir William's ". . . Apricocks, Peaches, Mellcotons [peaches grafted onto quinces], Quinces, Warden [winter pears], and such like fruits." He also grew grapes and produced his own wines.

Sericulture was a special interest of Sir William's, and the Governor planted many mulberry trees at Green Spring. By 1667, Virginia was able to send the king a gift of 300 pounds of silk. Black walnut trees on Berkeley's estate yielded wainscoting to ship back to London, and he reported that his servants had used local timber to produce a ton of potash as well. Berkeley made many attempts at diversification, but none of them could truly be considered successful. Shortage of investment funds, as well as adequate skilled labor, made these agricultural attempts at financial self-sufficiency unattainable.

Still, life in Virginia was not without its compensations. As Sir William wrote Lord Arlington in 1666, people in the colony "live after the simplicity of the past age; indeed, unless the danger of our country gave our fears tongues and language, we should shortly forget all sounds that did not concern the business and necessities of our farms."

For nearly 16 years, Sir William administered the colony for the Crown, a staunch Royalist. Then his world was shattered. Events in the Mother Country in the 1640's were to profoundly affect the colony of Virginia and her governor. In 1649, Charles I was beheaded and, two months later, Oliver Cromwell's army captured the last Royalist stronghold in England. The monarchy was at an end; the Commonwealth was born. In Virginia, Berkeley initially refused to recognize the new English government. He welcomed Royalists to Virginia; his "house and purse were open to all," according to Henry Norwood, one of the guests of Green Spring who had fled Cromwell's England.

Finally, in 1652, Berkeley had no choice but to give up the governorship. A fleet arrived from England bearing commissioners empowered to replace the Royalist government of Virginia with men selected by the Cromwellians. Berkeley raised an army of 1,000 men to defend Jamestown. The defense was not needed; the terms of surrender were hardly onerous and the governor agreed to disband his forces and retire.

During the next eight years, Sir William spent most of his time quietly at Green Spring. He was not to return to public service until the Restoration. With Charles II on the throne and the Commonwealth at an end, things would change for Virginia. By 1660, Berkeley was once more the colony's governor. Sir William was, however, not the same man he had been. Historians and biographers alike compare the youthful, flexible governor of the early days with the embittered, controlling man who took his place. The planters, who had become accustomed to little guidance from the Mother Country, were not in accord with Berkeley's increasingly autocratic style.

Matters became worse when hostile relations between Native Americans and English settlers broke out. Berkeley's reaction to the colonists' requests for aid was to arrange for meetings between hostile groups and to plead for restraint. Virginians were not satisfied with these measures and, further, considered Berkeley's forts in bad repair and poorly staffed. The colonists did not want restraint; they wanted action.

By 1676, a leader had emerged to challenge the authority of the governor and the Crown. Nathaniel Bacon, Jr. was everything that Sir William was no longer: young, charismatic and willing to meet the needs of the people at whatever cost to the colony. By late July, Bacon declared himself "General by Consent of the People" at Middle Plantation (later called Williamsburg). While Bacon was engaged with forays against Native Americans, Berkeley set sail for the Eastern Shore, where he gathered a small force and fleet to return to Jamestown and occupy the undefended capital.

Bacon's army, by now 300 strong, made Green Spring its camp from which to launch a successful assault on Jamestown. The town was burned. The easy victory was short-lived, however; Bacon's army moved on to Gloucester County where its leader, already ill, died. The rebel forces soon broke up, and Berkeley once again was in supreme command of the colony. The 70-year-old governor returned to his looted home at the end of January 1677. His wife described Green Spring in a letter to her cousin: "& for the house it looked like one of those the boys pull down at Shrovetide, & was almost as much to repair as if it had beene new to build."

Perhaps part of Berkeley's extreme punitive measures towards rebel ringleaders can be attributed to their treatment of his home. Even though the king had pardoned all but Bacon, the General Assembly which met at Green Spring in February began a reign of terror. The governor's enemies were ferreted out and subjected to imprisonment or execution, their lands and properties confiscated.

Eventually, Berkeley's revenge was curbed. Commissioners from the King arrived with a thousand soldiers and 11 ships to restore order and investigate the causes of the rebellion. By spring of 1677, Sir William had resigned as governor and set sail for the Mother Country to plead his case before the King. Lady Frances never saw her husband again. Sir William Berkeley died shortly after he arrived in England. By 1680, Philip Ludwell, a friend of Sir William, married his youthful widow. Eventually Philip Ludwell's son from a previous marriage, Philip Ludwell II inherited the property in 1710. It would remain in the Ludwell hands for nearly a century.

Under the Ludwells, Green Spring continued the tradition of open house for visiting planters. The second Philip Ludwell extended hospitality to all; the diary of William Byrd II frequently refers to entertainments the author enjoyed at Green Spring. By the time Philip Ludwell III inherited the property from his convivial father, planters no longer sought out the estate as a place to gather during "public times" at Williamsburg. The main route northwest from the capital had been changed, bypassing Green Spring.

Towards the close of the American Revolution, Green Spring would play host to yet another group of rebels. On the morning of July 6, 1781, 1200 American troops under the command of the Marquis de Lafayette and "Mad" Anthony Wayne used the house as marshalling area prior to engaging a 4500-man British force in The Battle of Green Spring. The late afternoon battle ended in a draw, but Green Spring was left in a bad state. Following the surrender of General Cornwallis's army at Yorktown three months later, Colonel Desandrouins, a French Engineers Officer, made a useful map of the area which delineated the Green Spring manor house and its various outbuildings.

William Ludwell Lee, who inherited the property in 1795, enlisted the help of French architect Benjamin Latrobe the year after to study Green Spring and make recommendations concerning its future. The architect produced a watercolor sketch of the mansion. In his pocket diary, Latrobe recorded his reactions to Green Spring:

It [Green Spring] is a brick building of great solidity, but no attempt at grandeur. The lower story was covered by an arcade which is pulled down. The porch has some clumsy ornamental brick work about the style of James the first ...

It is Mr. Lee's intention to pull down the present mansion and to erect a modest Gentleman's house near this spot. The antiquity of the old house, if in any case, ought to plead in the project, but its inconvenience and deformity are more powerful advocates for its destruction. In it, the oldest inhabited house in North America will disappear ...

Lee apparently found the mansion as unsuitable as did Latrobe, for he abandoned Green Spring and had it dismantled. Later, he constructed a house of his own about 300 feet behind the site of the structure built by Berkeley a century and a half before.

Interest in Green Spring as an archeological site began in the twentieth century. An amateur excavation was undertaken by the owner Jesse Dimmick in 1928-9; three basements were fully excavated and the bricks were sealed with cement to protect them from the elements.

In 1954, two commissions were created to help Virginia prepare for the 350th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown. Among other projects planned for 1957 was the reconstruction of Governor Berkeley's Green Spring mansion. Although the commissions did not find a sponsor willing to fund this ambitious task, the state of Virginia paid for an archaeological survey of portions of the site led by Louis R. Caywood, a National Park Service archeologist.

Caywood succinctly described his task, which began in November of 1954:

The excavations were carried out to search the area in the vicinity of the mansion house for the remains of buildings and features and to expose the foundations of the buildings for further measurements and especially for elevations.

Although the work was done hurriedly in bad weather, many important discoveries were made and measurements taken. Caywood and his staff made a detailed study of the manor house remains. A pottery kiln, built by Sir William about 1665, was uncovered when a test trench was dug. Caywood explored the remains of Berkeley's greenhouse, discovering the 350-pound cast iron base of the furnace which had heated the structure.

A kitchen site, probably dating to the seventeenth century was excavated; there remains of two hearths and two bake ovens were discovered. Iron filings in a corner of the kitchen foundations indicate that the last possible use of the structure may have been as a blacksmith shop. Caywood also was able to study some landscape features in the immediate vicinity of the house.

In addition to unearthing and studying structures, the excavation of Green Spring yielded a bountiful harvest of ceramics, metal wares, glassware, smoking pipes, tiles and bricks. Caywood estimated that at least 40% of the artifacts are of the period from 1650 to 1675. These objects, which range from an elaborate brass clock face to a sizable cache of farming tools found near the kiln site, emphasize the wealth of the Berkeley household and the Governor's interest in agriculture and industry at Green Spring.

The excavation ended on May 25, 1954. Much more could have been done, but time and money ran out. When reconstruction of the Berkeley-era manor house proved too expensive, the commission took Caywood's advice and backfilled the excavations to protect what had been found from the elements. For half a century, the site has remained undisturbed.

In 1966, the National Park Service purchased the site of Green Spring mansion, placing it under the administration of Colonial National Historical Park. A private local sponsoring organization, "The Friends of the National Park Service for Green Spring, Inc.," is committed to raising \$1.7 Million to complete archaeological work on the 308-acre site and open it to the public.

This material is based on a paper written by Park Ranger Lee Pelham Cotton.