

Flowerdew Hundred On the James

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Before the Pilgrims arrived in the new world, this plantation had been established and was flourishing. It was destined to play an important part in Virginia history and is now the site of the Flowerdew Hundred Foundation. The area was owned for several decades in the 1600s by the ancestor of Past Governor General Burk O. Barker, the author of this interesting story.

The story of Flowerdew Hundred is as much a story of a point of land on the historic James River as it is of a plantation dating from the very earliest colonial times. It begins about 370 years ago when one George Yeardley, a well-connected English gentlemen of modest means received a grant of land about 25 miles upriver from Jamestown. Yeardley's fortunes rose dramatically in a few years after his arrival in Virginia. Landing in 1610, by 1618 he had received the grant of land which he named Flowerdew Hundred, was knighted and appointed Governor of the Virginia Colony. The name Flowerdew probably derived from the family name of his wife, a prominent one in Norfolk, England, who had given Yeardley considerable financial support.

Flowerdew Hundred is unique among the great plantations along the James. Unlike Berkeley, Westover, Carter's Grove and other magnificent homes that still line the James, the Flowerdew buildings did not survive. Today, its primary interest lies in the fact that it has some of the best preserved sites for archaeological study of early colonial history in the former colonies. The first serious effort of archaeological study of Flowerdew was begun by people from William and Mary College. Really intensive work began under the direction of Professor James Deetz of the University of California at Berkeley. Dr. Dietz is a renowned archaeologist, a charismatic individual. I have met Dr. Dietz and found him to be a sensitive individual uniquely qualified to lead a study of early Virginia life with genuine appreciation and understanding. His efforts began in 1982 when he led a team of 35 archaeology students on a dig at the Flowerdew site.

Dates to Prehistoric Times

Curiously the digs to discover Flowerdew's past led to the discover of artifacts and evidence that the site had been inhabited for thousands of years before the coming of the English. Sites of prehistoric origin dating from the Archaic and Woodland phases of Indian cultural development were found. The Weanock tribe, part of the over two dozen which formed the Powhatan confederation, actually occupied the area which became Flowerdew Hundred. There was evidence that led to the belief that considerable trade between the Indians and occupants of Flowerdew flourished, the Indians trading furs, corn and game for trinkets, tools and cook wear. This peaceful intercourse ended with the major Indian uprising of 1622 when over 350 settlers

living along the James lost their lives. Fortunately, because Flowerdew was an exceptionally well defended plantation only six lives were lost there.

Perhaps the use of the word "hundred" as part of the designation of so many Virginia plantations stirs the question - why? Virginia, the Old Dominion, was perhaps the most "English" of the colonies and retained more of the common language usages of the mother country. In old England the term "hundred" was used to describe that amount of land required to support 100 men at arms. By the 17th century the term had evolved into the meaning of a unit of land which was an administrative entity was about half way between a shire and a parish.

It is not surprising that Flowerdew Hundred, that point of land and surrounding acreage, was so favored for settlement through the ages. To a considerable extent it is an alluvial area. The frequent flooding during times of high water replenishes and adds to the fertility of the soil. The particularly good growing conditions made it favored even by the semi-nomadic Indians. An additional attraction was that it was, and is, a favorite spot for migratory fowl, geese and ducks. Likewise, deer, bear and smaller animals were in plentiful supply. It is not unusual even now to spot a bear wondering through the wood as close as it is to urban localities. Evidence of habitation by the Paleo-Indian hunters who roamed the area 12,000 years ago has been found. All in all over 50 archaeological sites dating from the prehistoric to the 19th century have been found.

Represented at First Assembly

The year 1619 saw the beginning of the first legislative assembly in the new world. Yeardley, now the Virginia colony governor, led that body. Flowerdew Hundred had its own delegates to the first General Assembly of Virginia meeting on July 30, 1619 in the person of John Jefferson and Ensign Rostingham. Thus Flowerdew participated in the inauguration of the principle of rule by representation which a century and a half later brought on the great revolution against the British monarch.

Founded in 1619, Flowerdew Hundred by 1619 was a functioning plantation producing quantities of that crop which was the road to riches, tobacco. Yeardley was on his way to becoming the wealthiest man in the colony. He seemed to spare no effort to make Flowerdew a model plantation. He had constructed, in 1621, the first windmill in the colonies for grinding grain. Even today that spot on the James is known as Windmill Point. A replica has been built by the Flowerdew Foundation, it is again grinding grain as of old. Visitors may purchase the stone-ground cornmeal so good to the palate and good for the health. A census in 1624 showed 63 people living on the plantation; eleven were black laborers, 48 were indentured servants and 15 were skilled craftsmen.

By 1624 Yeardley, prospering to the point where he was considered the richest man in the colony, decided to sell the plantation to Abraham Peirse, another wealthy merchant/planter. A gauge of the continuing growth of the wealth of the plantation is an inventory conducted in 1625

after Peirseay assumed ownership. There were now 12 dwelling houses, 4 tobacco barns, 3 general storehouses, and, of course, the windmill. As to livestock, there were some 70 head of cattle and hogs, plentiful supplies of grain, peas and cured fish in the warehouses. Despite the obvious prosperity, or perhaps in part because of it, there was a continuing concern for the security of Flowerdew. The lessons of the massacre of 1622 were still fresh. An inventory of weapons showed a plentiful supply of small arms, breast armor and the six cannon still in place. It is sometimes forgotten but there was a lingering concern in the colony, not only fear of Indian raids, but possible incursions by the Spanish. In reality, however, the Indians were the most dangerous threat to security.

Purchased by William Barker

Peirseay's tenure at Flowerdew was short lived for he died in 1628. His widow, Frances, was not adept at plantation management. The place fell into a decline until it was sold to William Barker, merchant, mariner and planter in 1639. Barker was a man of prominence in the colony and represented Charles City County in the General Assembly of Virginia for a term in 1645. Under William Barker and his son John, Flowerdew Hundred again became a prosperous enterprise. The Barkers owned Flowerdew for a longer time than any other, from 1639 to 1673. It passed to John's sisters, Sarah, wife of Robert Lacy and Elizabeth, wife of Phillip Lambrey, by inheritance. In the years following by right of inheritance or sale Flowerdew passed to other hands. Nonetheless, Flowerdew land has been in continuous cultivation for 375 years.

Benedict Arnold Visits

The history of Flowerdew touches on events which are of interest to the Order on two occasions other than its early beginning. It was during the American Revolution that the traitor Benedict Arnold paid a visit to Flowerdew. On February 3rd, 1781 Arnold's forces came upon Flowerdew from where he sent his men against Fort Hood about 2,500 feet downstream. With his superior forces he quickly overcame the tiny fort and spiked its guns. On the following day he moved to the next plantation, Westover, and thence to Richmond. His assault on Richmond resulted in causing Governor Thomas Jefferson and his staff to flee to the Blue Ridge to avoid capture. After his "noble" deed he fell back to Flowerdew where he faced a small force of Virginia Militia. The militia dissolved into the woods and so lived to fight another day. On the 11th of February 1781 Arnold and his band left Flowerdew and sailed on down river.

Involved in Civil War

The next brush with history came in 1864. Remember that period of time which the gentle and genteel southern ladies of the later 19th century called "the late unpleasantness"? In the days starting June 12th, 1864 the father of our first Governor General caused his troops to invade the property once belonging to the family of our 44th Governor General. It was after General Ulysses S. Grant was bloodied badly by Lee at Cold Harbor, losing 12,000 men in just a few hours, that he decided to slip away to the south a bit. He came to the James River, found a likely

spot and ordered his engineers to build a pontoon bridge across in order that he could move to Petersburg and try to cut Lee's supply lines there.

Grant's engineers performed a remarkable feat of engineering. They constructed a bridge 1,992 feet long from Wyanoke on the north bank to Flowerdew Hundred on the south. Over this bridge he moved 60,000 troops, a supply train over 50 miles long and 3,000 head of cattle. Grant's troops availed themselves of Flowerdew's "hospitality, and harvested all the early vegetable and other foodstuffs. They found comfort in their cook fires and warmth in their campfires from wood generously furnished by the farm outbuildings after which they moved on to the outer defenses of Petersburg. No need to recount this episode and how it unfolded -- history buffs know it well.

Foundation on Site

Today, the Flowerdew Hundred Foundation, a non-profit organization, is headquartered at the old plantation site. During the period April, 1988 to March, 1989 the Foundation in collaboration with the National Museum of American History produced an interesting exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. At the original site, on Virginia Route 10, five miles east of the southern terminus of the Benjamin Harrison bridge, the Foundation has its headquarters and there operates an archaeological laboratory, museum, workshop and research library. The Foundation sponsors, hosts and occasionally supports special educational programs.

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