Breaking New Ground
Stratford's Sustainable Agriculture Program Contrasts 18th and 21st Century Farming Practices

Stratford has embarked on a new sustainable agriculture program with plans to create a new series of programs that will explore the significant issue of agriculture development in Virginia from the colonial period to the present. The principal focus of this program will be to contrast 18th and 21st century agricultural practices.

During the colonial period, Virginia agriculture was dominated by tobacco. The enormous wealth created by the production of tobacco made it possible for the Lees and other Virginia planters to build their magnificent homes, create a social system that encouraged progressive political ideas, and live a life of rural gentility and relative independence.

While tobacco created great wealth and is what made Virginia an economically successful colony, its cultivation had other, less desirable, outcomes. Tobacco production favored large scale production and required large quantities of labor. Its cultivation was dominated by an elite planter class that controlled vast amounts of land and labor, to the exclusion of smaller farmers. The challenge of securing an adequate labor force was solved by creating a system of chattel slavery where people of African descent were brought to Virginia against their will.

Cultivation of tobacco also encouraged the adoption of wasteful agricultural practices. Land was abundant, so there was little incentive to adopt sustainable agricultural practices. In fact, the notion of sustainability did not exist as we understand it today. Many Virginians acknowledged the challenge they faced with maintaining soil fertility and productivity. This struggle between environment, labor and economic systems is a constant theme of period diaries and letters.

The Civil War finally ended the South’s reliance on slave labor; however, it did not resolve the struggle with southern environment or correct years of failing agricultural practices. While there were efforts at reform, it took the depression to create the impetus for real change. Ultimately, farmers adopted modern “scientific” practices including mono-crop farms that relied on the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Most Americans are unaware of the historical developments that have created our present agricultural and food production network. The principal purpose of Stratford Hall’s organic farming program is to address this important issue, enabling our visitors to fully understand this complex historical relationship between agriculture, the environment, the economy, and diet.

To read more about our sustainable farming program, visit our website StratfordHall.org and click on Blogs under “Learn.”
I was struck by “Charlemagne’s” column in the July 9, 2009 issue of The Economist, entitled “A Belgian National Champion.” The article is an all-out assault on the artist Antoine Wiertz, and the museum in Brussels dedicated to his work. The byline, “a terrible lesson from a terrible painter,” says a lot about Charlemagne’s opinion of Wiertz’s art.

When the Belgian government agreed to establish the museum in 1850, Wiertz was a respected artist. In fact, he was hailed as a national hero. Into the 20th century, the museum continued to draw a respectable number of visitors. In the 21st century, however, it appears Mr. Wiertz has lost his appeal. The museum now attracts only ten visitors a day; most of these school children compelled to visit by their teachers. The author’s principal point is that governments are not especially good at judging the whims of posterity so they should avoid encumbering future generations with museums (or car companies or banks).

I am not interested in either defending or attacking Antoine Wiertz and I will not challenge the premise that governments ought to avoid propping up companies that can’t compete in a free market. What does concern me is the notion that since Wiertz is no longer fashionable his museum should be closed or eliminated. This is a dangerous precedent that by extension could also be applied to history as well as art museums.

As anyone who has travelled throughout Europe or The United States knows, the landscape is littered with museums dedicated to the once famous and now obscure. All of them have something to contribute to a broader understanding of our past. If we allow the lessons and experiences of the past to be subject to the whims and caprices of the present, the future will be a frightening place.

This story has another important lesson. For those of us who work for and care about museums, we must be ever vigilant to assure that our mission and purpose remain relevant and engaging. Everyone here at Stratford Hall is devoted to assuring that the accomplishments and legacy of Robert E. Lee, Richard Henry Lee, Francis Lightfoot Lee and all four generations of the Lee family are remembered and respected.

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Stratford Hall’s increasing attendance and financial support indicates our efforts are not in vain. The Belgian government needs to get Antoine Wiertz a more effective advocate. Charlemagne need not apply.

Paul C. Reber
Executive Director
“Because of our emphasis on hands-on learning, many consider our program one of the best two-year programs in the nation.”

Springing To Action on the Spring House
As Part of Hands-On Learning Experience, Ohio’s Belmont College Students Restore Spring House

For a week at the end of June, Belmont Technical College’s Building Preservation/Restoration program brought eight students to Stratford Hall to preserve one of the spring houses. This project was chosen as the first collaboration between Stratford Hall and Belmont Technical College in St. Clairsville, Ohio, according to Phil Mark, Stratford Hall’s Director of Preservation and an alumni of Belmont.

Belmont students taking part in the project included Gabe Richmond, Michelle Morrison, Sarah Holblital, Renate Bruza, Tyler Yoder, Eric Rohling, Cindy Hill-King and Robert Reams.

Over the course of the week the students were able to complete the needed preservation work. This included installing a new cypress shingle roof, painting all the wood elements, repointing, brick replacement, brick wall stabilization and stair repair. As with most all preservation work, as they began working, new problems were identified and the group handled them with ease. One of the problems encountered by the group was rotting purlins and rafters. They were able to consolidate or replace these areas and continue with the project.

“Buildings continue to age faster than we can restore them and because existing and newly trained crafts people only satisfy about 75 percent of what the historic restoration industry needs, our graduates are usually in demand, said Professor Dave Mertz, who founded and has directed Belmont’s Building Restoration Program for two decades.

“Because of our emphasis on hands-on learning, many consider our program one of the best two-year programs in the nation,” said Mertz.

“This first collaboration was a success for both the Belmont students and Stratford Hall,” noted Phil Mark. “The spring house was preserved while students gained hands-on experience at an historical site. We are hoping to continue this relationship in the future. It is my hope to continue supporting students who are pursuing a career in hands-on preservation through internships and field labs here at Stratford Hall.”

Belmont Technical College students begin renovation work on one of the two Stratford spring houses. Eight students took part in the week long preservation project that gave students practical hands-on field experience.
The next time you stroll the grounds surrounding the Great House, walk the hiking trails, travel to the Potomac overlook or visit the Mill, you will notice something new. Through a matching grant made possible by the Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network, seven new wayside exhibits recently installed focus on the 17th century landscape at Stratford.

In addition, an eighth wayside exhibit entirely funded by Stratford helps better identify a slave graveyard that lies next to the Council House.

“We believe these new wayside exhibits will provide our visitors with an enhanced experience regarding the vast and diverse natural and cultural landscape that is Stratford Hall,” said Paul Reber, Stratford Hall Executive Director.

The seven new exhibits include information on American Indians at Stratford; the Clifts Plantation site and burial ground; the Chesapeake Bay; the Cliffs; the Mill Pond and early forests. The waysides were produced by the 1717 Design Group, Inc. of Richmond, VA.

“The Gateways Network was pleased to assist Stratford Hall with this project to expand their interpretation and utilization of the site,” said John Maounis, Superintendent of the NPS Chesapeake Bay Office. “These waysides place new emphasis on the Chesapeake Bay and its ecology during the early days of European settlement of the region, as well as how colonists interacted with this environment to carve out lives for themselves in Virginia.”

Visitors to Stratford will find the “American Indians at Stratford” wayside near the Octagon building at the northeast side of the Great House; the “Clifts Plantation Site” and “Clifts Plantation Burial Ground” waysides on the road to the Potomac Overlook; the “Chesapeake Bay Then and Now” wayside is on the Mill Overlook Trail; “Early Forests” wayside is on the Little Meadow Trail; “The Cliffs” wayside is on the Silver Beech Trail; “The Mill Pond” wayside is located on the Mill Pond Trail and the “Slave Cemetery” wayside is located in-between the Council House and the Dining Room.

For visitors wishing to visit just the grounds, Stratford offers a Grounds Pass which is $5 for adults and $3 for children.

For more information on the new wayside exhibits please read our Blog found on our website under “Learn” at StratfordHall.org. For more information on the Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network visit baygateways.net.
We Dig Stratford Hall
Evidence of Another Building Found as UMW Field School Wraps Up Its 2009 Session

This year’s University of Mary Washington Archeological Field School departed on June 19th after five weeks of excavating in the field west of the Oval. Most of the test units are now backfilled, leaving just a few open for future study.

The weather this summer was fairly cooperative since the intermittent rains kept the ground soft for digging.

The exciting discoveries for the season were two large postholes for an earthfast building close to the present paved road. These postholes, found during the final days of the field school, have other features associated with them which were probably storage pits within the building.

The students found plenty of artifacts, such as pieces of ceramics, glass wine bottle fragments, iron nails and large amounts of crumbled brick throughout the excavation area.

These artifacts basically date from the same period as the artifacts found in other parts of the Oval site. The units also yielded evidence for gardening and fences.

The spacing of the newly found postholes will allow field school director Dr. Doug Sanford to estimate where other postholes would likely be located. Determining the size and nature of the structure will have to wait for future field school investigations.

To date the field school has uncovered various building sites on the Oval, then in the “triangle” area across from the Oval, and now in the field west of the Oval.
Named for Lady Astor, Stratford’s first Director for Great Britain, the Astor Guest House underwent a major makeover this past winter. The work included installation of new bathrooms in the guestrooms, new beds and drapes, a revamped kitchen, painting and electrical work. And for those who like to “stay in touch with the outside world,” the Astor now provides wireless Internet access.

Many people find the Astor, with its six guest rooms the perfect place for small groups and family retreats making it the perfect place to “get away from it all” and spend a quiet, relaxing weekend. Larger groups who require the use of Stratford’s full compliment of lodging many times find the Astor perfect for staff lodging.

The Astor features a comfortable common living area with a cozy atmosphere, as well as a dining area with an outdoor deck. Three guest rooms have twin beds and three rooms have a king-sized bed, each with a private bath.

The Astor log cabin guest house is conveniently located within walking distance of Stratford's other lodging facilities and is located directly across the street from the dining room.

From the magnificent view of the Potomac River to the formal gardens and quiet nature trails, Stratford is a great place to stay for a weekend getaway or your next group meeting.

In addition to accommodations, Stratford has several meeting facilities available for use for meetings and events. They include the Council House, the duPont room in the Jessie Ball duPont Memorial Library and the Preservation Gallery in the Visitor Center. And Stratford’s Dining Room can cater your event.

For more information on our lodging and meeting facilities, visit our website at StratfordHall.org or call 804-493-8038.
Lee Circle Your Calendar!
This year’s Lee Circle Dinner will be Friday, October 16, 2009.

The Lee Circle was established in 2006 as a crucial network of donors who give generously to support Stratford and its mission of historical and cultural preservation, architectural and archeological research, as well as educating students, faculty and the public through a host of special programs.

We invite you to join us this year to be a part of Lee Circle. Members are asked to contribute $5000 or more annually. These funds allow us to continue the work of promoting scholarly historical understanding as it relates to our challenging and ever changing world.

We are committed to nurturing the leadership that our forefathers embodied and passing that on to the visitors we host, and faculty and students who are inspired here.

At the Lee Circle Dinner every fall, we honor the Circle members and hear from someone who upholds the leadership qualities that were so important in Stratford’s history and to the founding of this country. This year we are excited to announce that our guest will be General Brent Scowcroft.

Please make plans to join Lee Circle today, and to join us for dinner on Friday, October 16. If you have any questions, contact Stratford Hall’s Development office at (804) 493-8038 x 8919 or development@stratfordhall.org

Gen. Scowcroft is one of the nation’s preeminent authorities on international policy. He served as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs to both Presidents Ford and George H. W. Bush. He also served as Military Assistant to President Nixon and as Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs to Presidents Ford and Nixon. He has incredible perspective on the qualities it takes to lead a nation and its institutions, and the benefits and perils that are inherent with that responsibility.
Calendar of Events
For more info visit StratfordHall.org

**September 26**
Northern Neck Food and Harvest Festival
Celebrate the fall season with a fun festival for the whole family. The day will include hayrides, music, food, gristmill tours, and colonial games and activities just for kids, as well as regional artisans and wine tasting. Sponsored by Peoples Community Bank.

**October 2–6**
Symposium on Slavery
This multiple-day residential symposium is for teachers and museum professionals. It will feature a stimulating array of presentations offered by leading scholars in the field. The symposium is being sponsored in part by a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.

**October 22–24**
Cultural Landscapes of the Northern Neck
Examining manifold aspects of the historic architecture and landscape settings of Virginia’s Northern Neck region, this program incorporates a stimulating mix of lectures and site visits, supported by a thoroughly-researched and well-illustrated “guidebook” prepared especially for the symposium.

**October 28–29**
Rediscovering the Historic House: Creating a New Paradigm For the Visitor Experience
A dynamic symposium lead by a wide-ranging panel of experts will explore how historic houses can serve present and future museum audiences. The October 29 session, where panelists will make their presentations, is open to museum professionals and general public.

**October 31**
Historical Haunts
Special ghost tours of the Great House will be offered during this evening event. Other activities include crafts and Halloween games. This program is for children and adults of all ages.

Sign up for our E-Newsletter
If you would like to receive our e-newsletter, you can now sign up on the website. Click on “Visit” and you will see a link on the side column for the e-newsletter. Also be sure to go to the website and check out the latest entries on our blogs. Click on “Learn” and you will see a link to Blogs—and don’t forget to join our Facebook page as well.