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Belfield: View of the Garden, by Charles Willson Peale, 1816. Privately owned; reprinted by permission.

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CHARLES WILLSON PEALE'S FARM AND GARDEN AT BELFIELD

By Geraldine Duclow*



Belfield Mansion, in 1906, from a postcard.¹

It seems appropriate that an extraordinary man like Charles Willson Peale, painter, naturalist, inventor, and the head of an equally remarkable family, should have had a rather unusual farm and garden. Peale purchased his Germantown farm in 1810 with the intention of retiring there. He was nearly seventy and had been in poor health, suffering particularly from violent headaches which he thought were aggravated by the arsenic compounds he used to preserve his museum's natural history specimens. Now that his son Rubens had taken over the management of the museum in Philadelphia, Peale felt he could find renewed vigor and stimulation in outdoor work done in Germantown's fresh country air. Still the scientist, he intended to engage in agricultural experiments and possibly some light manufacturing.

In exchange for \$9,500.00 Peale took ownership of 104 acres of land, formerly the old Neave farm. The Wingohocking Creek and a smaller stream ran through the property forming gentle waterfalls among the rocks and wooded areas. There were several run down buildings including a large gambrel roofed stone house, "rather old fashioned and in the German style," said Peale, along with an old stone barn, a wagon house, and other smaller structures. The farm was then located about six miles outside of Philadelphia and a half mile from the center of Germantown. Today the Belfield manor house remains in east Germantown at the bottom of Clarkson Street, off Wister. The property is bordered by Olney Avenue, Twentieth Street and Belfield Avenue. Peale's farm had also included land that is now part of La Salle College, and the sites of Germantown Hospital and many private residences.

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Peale promptly named his new venture "Farm Persevere." His friends objected to this title, however, saying that it meant visitors were unfairly obliged to physically assist him in his "perseverance." So two years later he renamed the place "Belfield." It had been at John Hesselius' home "Bellefield," on the banks of the Severn River in Maryland, that Peale had first studied painting.

When Peale and his wife moved into the farmhouse they brought with them his five youngest children, ranging in age from five to sixteen years of age, hoping that they too would benefit from the wholesome environment. Hannah Moore was actually Peale's third wife, a patient and kind Quakeress who had married him five years earlier. It was soon clear that Peale, at least, was enjoying the change of scene. On June 8, 1810 he wrote to his son Rembrandt,

You cannot well conceive how much I have been occupied, coming to a place where everything was out of order and no laboring men to be hired except by the day for a dollar, which price I could not afford to give, yet was necessitated to do it for many parts of the necessary work . . . Constant exercise in a fine, high and healthy situation, living principally on a milk diet has done wonders for me . . . So that if I got nothing else for the money which this place cost me, the purchase would be a good bargain when we add to it that I have found a constant source of amusement of the most salutary kind—and adding value to an invaluable spot, a spot capable of being made not only delightful to live on, but also a profitable farm with a stream of water and sites for two mills, at least sufficient for carrying on any kind of manufacturing of cotton or wool . . . Your mother finds it the most convenient house she ever lived in, but my improvements help to render it so.¹

Although a novice, Peale was planning on a full working farm with a dairy, orchard, and crops of rye, wheat and Indian corn. He was anxious "to put into practice everything that promises to ameliorate the condition of man" using the most up to date methods and devices. In this regard he was following the lead of Thomas Jefferson, who had also retired from public life to his own Monticello estate in 1809. The two men were old friends and had often enjoyed discussion on topics of mutual interest, especially natural history and scientific inquiry. Therefore Peale was delighted to hear from Jefferson again in a letter dated August 20, 1811, "I have heard that you have retired from the city to a farm, and that you give your whole time to that. Does not the Museum suffer? And is the farm as interesting? . . . Think of me sometimes when you have your pen in hand, and give me information of your health and occupations."

Jefferson went on to describe his own system of crop rotation, and commented "I have often thought that if heaven had given me a choice of my position and calling, it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered, and near a good market for the productions of the garden. No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden."²

Obviously Peale agreed with Jefferson since he promptly and enthusiastically wrote a lengthy response to him on September 9th:

My good friend, I most cheerfully accept your kind invitation of a renewal of correspondence, though with very [little] expectation that I shall be able to add to your stock of information in your favorite occupations. However with this pleasing hope, that as my subjects must necessarily be on the culture of the earth, I shall get instruction in my new occupation, that of a farmer, which thus may be diffused to others, . . .

My first planting of strawberry beds succeeded, and everything was promising when our harvest came on. I thought that a few days' neglect of the garden might be soon repaired by giving assistance to the gardener. Rain succeeding a long drought made the weeds grow so fast that the loss of labor could not be recovered, [and a] great part of my new garden became a wilderness. I am now taught that a garden must be constantly attended to.

This is not the only mistake I have committed, even with the best intentions. I see my farm and those of all my neighbors around having an abundance of weeds. I thought that if I cut off those weeds while in blossom that I should prevent them from seeding, and by a persevering labor of cutting them off, I should at last have my place free of weeds. I procured briar hooks and set to work at my destruction of the St. Johnsworth, wild carrots and plantain. It was my daily work for a long time, and I conceived that I was doing wonders. I made the muscles of my right arm sore. I then began with my left hand, as I thought that I must go on. But, after some time, visiting those parts where my herculean labor began, I found that where I had cut off one head, hydralike, a half-dozen had sprouted up in its place, and then I found that I ought to have rooted them up, as I had done with the docks, to do any good. . . .

Some of my friends tell me that I would soon be tired of country life, as others of their acquaintance had been. I believe my fondness for the farmer's life is becoming daily stronger.³

Rubens Peale frequently visited his family at Belfield, reporting on the museum's activities and city news as well as lending a hand with the farm chores. He had a special interest in botany and took on the laborious task of replacing the old broken fences with thorn hedges, such as he and his father had admired in England when they were on tour exhibiting their mastodon skeleton. It was also Rubens who began to plan the large garden that would soon spread down the hillside south of the house. His father saw to it that the site was first cleared of stumps and the soil prepared by planting a crop of potatoes which would ultimately add desirable nutrients. Then a complex system of underground drains was developed to help ease away excess rain and melting snow. Rubens laid out paths and edged them with boxwood, and the family began adding flowers, herbs and fruits such as raspberries, strawberries and rhubarb. One walkway led from the front door of the house to a sundial, surrounded by flowers, on the crest of the hill. From here the garden stretched out down the sunny slope, with smaller hills and woodland on either side.

According to Charles Peale's description.

The garden pails [fences] are on a stone wall on which grow creepers now in full bloom. They are a fine crimson bell flower in clusters, and an abundance of hummingbirds are daily sucking the honey. Green Gages, Damson [both plums], Quinces, are along this wall and beneath the rose bushes you may discover a long roof which has shelves for bee hives, conveniently situated to get their food from the flowers in the garden. A house between the coach house and mansion we call the smokehouse is so much covered with the elegant creeper that it can scarcely be seen.⁴

Peale's elegant creeper sounds like the Trumpet Vine (*Campsis*), an attractive but extremely vigorous grower that today can still easily take over a whole house.

The Peales discovered that one of the springs which flowed through the lower part of the garden had hollowed out a considerable cavity at its source up the hillside. Thinking this would be a good location for a type of rootcellar to keep cabbages, turnips, etc. through the winter, Peale and his sons walled up and arched over the hollow with stones. The warm, moist atmosphere however, caused the vegetables to begin sprouting in January and they had to be removed. This situation gave Rubens the idea of constructing in the autumn of 1812 one of the most unusual early American greenhouses. By building a wood and glass structure adjoining the mouth of their south-facing cave, with the spring running through it, the temperature remained warm enough during the winter months to hold over "exotic" plants until the spring without having to use a stove. The project succeeded and the greenhouse became a useful and, according to Peale's painting of Belfield, a charming addition to what was becoming a famous ornamental garden spot.

Unfortunately we do not know exactly what "exotic" plants were grown in the greenhouse, but the citrus fruits

were popular choices and a lemon is depicted in Peale's painting "The Fruits of Belfield." It would have been possible for the Peales to obtain hothouse plants and seeds, as well as gardening advice from Bernard M'Mahon, a Philadelphia nurseryman and author of the *American Gardener's Calendar* (1806), the first truly American horticultural guide. M'Mahon had greenhouses at his Germantown estate, Upsala. His catalogs of the period which list "Seeds of Tender Shrubs" include many old favorites: geraniums, myrtle, oleander and the colorful Jerusalem Cherry (Ornamental Pepper).

The spring, which now gently cascaded down from beneath the new greenhouse, formed a pool at the base of the slope. In another direction, about fifteen feet above this pool there was a fish pond, fed by another stream, which the Peales thought could provide water for a fountain in the lower pool. They made log pipes and set them underground between the two to create a continuous jet of water rising several feet into the air. To promote the height of the water spray, the diameter of the pipes was only one inch. This caused a problem, however, because, to quote Peale,

The consequence was that Frogs in Two instances got into the bore of the logs and not being able to pass through all the joints, stoped the water, and of course to free the passage of the logs gave much labor. Had these things been forseen, trouble might have been prevented, by making the bore of the logs of greater diameter, with other provisions to keep the passage free.⁵

By 1813 the entire family was getting into the spirit of things, and another one of Peale's sons, Franklin, made the fountain even more impressive, despite the frogs. With a more elaborate system of pipes he created another half dozen smaller spiral jets around the edge of the pool and adjusted the main spray so that it supported a wooden gilt ball 10-13 feet in the air. For an impressive effect in the evenings the wooden ball was replaced, according to one chronicle, by a "globe in which a taper lighted at night would burn for a few minutes until the oxygen was consumed."

Along with some frogs the fish pond had plenty of catfish that Peale had brought over from the Schuylkill River, but instead of providing food they, like the pigeons and many other animals around the farm, came to be considered as pets. Some Germantown residents used to think that the cave which remained on the property for many years was used by Peale as a bear pit, but there is no real evidence to support this. Peale did, however, bring an elk with him to Belfield and continued to raise and observe him for several years.

Meanwhile Peale's more practical innovations in farming included the use of the plow Jefferson developed along with his suggestions about contour plowing to help avoid erosion on the hillsides. Peale himself invented a self leveling milk cart, machines for planting corn and paring apples, and an improved horse rake.

A mill was set up in 1812, primarily for grinding tools and working grain. Part of the mill system was set up as a washing machine for his wife's convenience. Despite all of Peale's enlightened practices, however, the farm was not showing a profit, partly because he was always trying something new, and partly because so far he had not established a cash crop.

Upon the suggestion of his friend and neighbor Robert Morris, Peale began in 1812 to plant currants with the intention of making wine. This was a difficult decision for Peale because as he says of himself "he believed the drinking of wine a pernicious habit, and he therefore drank none of his excellent wine. But his friends seemed to enjoy it. Yet he never felt a freedom to press it on them." The wine of Belfield had been called "heady" and "sweet," but although it became quite sought after in Philadelphia, it did not bring in a significant income.⁶

But adventure in a wholesome environment, not profit, had been Peale's main aim and as the farm became more established he began to turn his attention to leisure painting and the joys of his garden. He was so pleased with the fountain and greenhouse that he began to add other ornaments, which gave him an opportunity to use his decorative skills to encourage moral reflection.

For example, Peale extended the walk in front of the house and at the end of it he put up a tall obelisk. It was made of wood and finished to look like white stone. Around its base he painted the following inscription:

Never return an Injury. It is a noble Triumph to overcome Evil by Good.

Labor while you are able. It will give health to the Body—peaceful content to the Mind.

Neglect no duty, He that would live at Peace and Rest must hear, and see, and say the best.

For some reason Peale actually chose to put the last two lines in French. Elsewhere in the garden another obelisk listed "The 90 memorable events in North America," with space left for the first Atlantic steam ship crossing, which Peale was sure would soon take place. Peale himself found these epigrams and patriotic reminders uplifting and hoped his children and friends would also be inspired.

On one of the hills surrounding the garden Peale built a summer house with a bust of George Washington on the top of it. The dome roof beneath the bust stood upon six wooden pillars which Franklin had turned at the farm's mills. In one of the glades, called "The Echo," a Chinese style pavilion was built. Dedicated to meditation, the inscription around the white wood arch and seats read in part.

Meditate . . . on the changes and revolutions of the Globe which we inhabit . . . Then let me ask myself why am I here? Am I blessed with more profound reason than other Animals? If so, Let me meditate on the past, on the present, and on the future.

Perhaps Peale's most ambitious garden project was a combination tool shed and garden seat. He did a trompe l'oeil painting on the front of the shed showing an archway and the sky beyond. The step leading up to it was real and served as the bench. Atop the arch were several cut out allegorical figures, including America carrying the scales of Justice, along with Industry, Truth, and Temperance. To assist visitors with the allegory there were two pedestals, topped with spheres, bearing suitable inscriptions. Also on the roof there was the figure of Mars, "A wise Policy will do away with wars. Hence Mars is fallen."⁷

Peale's moralizing did not in any way discourage guests from touring his gardens. On the contrary, Belfield became a popular resort. In his autobiography Peale says that the garden became his "hobby-horse," as well as

the admiration of numerous visitors, it was in some measure like the Vaux Hall of Germantown—and although every precaution was made to prevent trespass, yet it could not always be prevented where the multitude was admitted at all times, but at last he found it absolutely necessary to shut the Gates on Sundays, as then all the labouring classes of Society was let loose, and it was impossible to restrain them from plundering the fruit; and the farm and garden had by the aid of Rubens Peale been provided with the most choice fruit of every sort ... and among other things there was a surprising echo since the erection of the mill, the end of which at a certain point in the road, repeated about 5 or 6 words very audibly in a more distinct manner than is commonly meet with.⁸

In 1814 Peale wrote to one of his daughters, "I am a young farmer, and learning daily to improve the place, which pleases me so well that I seldom visit the city, and indeed the noise, bustle and stench is truly disgusting to one of my time of life." He continued to keep busy with a cotton spinning mill at one of the waterfalls, and after several attempts he finally succeeded in designing a functional windmill to pump water. Yet after 1815 Peale began to spend less time at Belfield, leaving it to the care of a tenant farmer. In his unpublished autobiography, written in the third person, Peale says "He now thought of devoting most of his time in painting as his eye was now opened to see his folly of making various machines which cost labour and money and no real profit." Now seventy-four years old, he began to visit Philadelphia and the museum more often and pay more attention to painting and reading. When his wife died in 1821 he lost interest in the farm altogether and the gardens of Belfield became overgrown and neglected. Needing money to support other ventures Peale finally sold Belfield in January 1826, about a year before his death at eighty-six years of age.

Peale had evaluated his several years at Belfield in his autobiography, again writing in the third person:

These amusements cost some money and much time ... the labor gave health, and happiness is the result of constant employment. His inventions pleased himself, and they gave pleasure to others and offended none—being perfectly innocent. But the economist will say, time, money and labor was misspent. He answers, that happiness is worth millions.⁹

Belfield had been sold to William Logan Fisher who in turn gave it to his daughter when she married William Wister. The house and some of the property remained in the Wister family for many years with enough of Peale's landscape garden left to bring pleasure to a few additional generations. Ella Wister Haines remembered playing at Belfield before the turn of the century:

The garden at Belfield was a lovely place ... its walks, hedges, trees and flowers, particularly its manifold box bushes, were a rare sight. Looking west from the front porch a walk of flag stones led to the driveway and long, tree shaded avenue, ending in Clarkson Avenue ... Running parallel with it, bordered with box bush and flowers was a foot path, culminating in the white monument

already mentioned ... If you turned left you walked past the big Spanish Chestnut tree, and leading to the old Peale summer house which looked down on the meadow and woods below, now Belfield Avenue ... Here we played by the hour, and here later the maidens of the family would sit with an endless procession of beaux.¹⁰

This was the Chinese style summer house that Peale had dedicated to "Meditation." It was eventually restored by the Wister family in 1933, complete with all of Peale's worthy inscriptions. It had stood, visible from the train station on a rise overlooking Wister's Woods.

Another Wister cousin, Sarah Logan Wister Starr, said that their grandmother mentioned the small hot house on the hillside being there when she came to Belfield as a bride in 1826. Back in the 1930's a small greenhouse on the property was thought to have been Peale's original one, and it still held some of the family's heirloom plants, including cereus cactus, a huge aloe, a pink camellia, crown-of-thorns, fuchsias and scented leaved geraniums."

Ella Wister Haines also recalled that during her childhood

... a row of terraces extended to the south, stone steps leading down. One pair of steps led to Gram'ma's greenhouse ... and continued down to the little fish pond fed by a clear cold spring of delicious water. Here a few gold fish disported themselves among the grasses, water cress growing in abundance ... Close by was an old stone cave, origin unknown, but it both fascinated and frightened children, we never went inside ... These grounds were our natural roaming place ... we were ever welcome. It was a glorious heritage.

Fascination and adventure—Charles Willson Peale would have understood.

1. Charles Coleman Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale, Philadelphia, 1947*, pp. 219-222.
2. *Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, Philadelphia, 1944*, p. 461.
3. Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, pp. 253-255.
4. Alice G.B. Lockwood, *Gardens of Colony and of State, New York, 1931*.
5. Charles Willson Peale, *Autobiography, Typescript at the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia*, p. 394.
6. Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale*, p. 265.
7. Peale, *Autobiography*, p. 390-392.
8. Peale, *Autobiography*, p. 390.
9. Peale, *Autobiography*, p. 394.
10. Ella Wister Haines, "Memories of a Victorian Childhood," *German-town Crier*, September 1956, pp. 26-27.
11. Sarah Logan Wister Starr, *History of Belfield, Philadelphia, 1934*, p. 21.

