

Arlington House: The Plantation

Instantly my thoughts flew to the old garden at Arlington. In all parts of the world I have seen others, adorned and beautified by Kings and Princes, but none ever seemed so fair to me, as this Kingdom of my childhood Mildred Lee, 1890



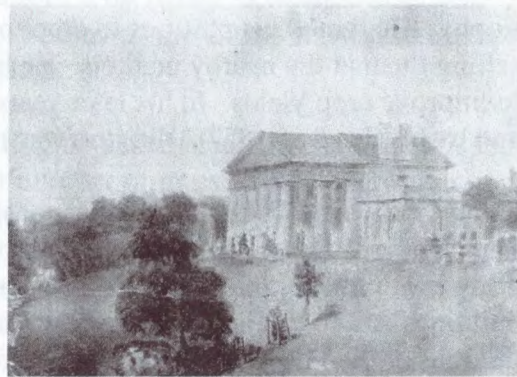
Map of the Arlington Plantation

In 1669, some 120 English, Irish, and Scottish settlers arrived by ship in this region of Virginia. To show his appreciation for the arrival of the new colonists, the Royal Governor of Virginia, Sir William Berkeley, presented the ship's captain with a 6,000 acre land grant. In 1778 John Custis, the son of Martha Washington and stepson of George Washington, purchased a portion of this land along the west bank of the Potomac. Custis died during the

Revolutionary War and his estate passed to his only son, George Washington Parke Custis. After the death of his grandmother, Martha Washington in 1802, young George Custis left Mount Vernon to establish a new home on the estate that would eventually be named Arlington.

For almost sixty years, Arlington functioned as a 1,100-acre plantation, or a "working farm" in the words of Mr. Custis. In addition to the Arlington Estate, Custis owned over 17,000 acres of land and approximately 200 slaves. Much of Custis's income came from his Pamunkey River plantations, Romancoke and White House, both of which were worked by large numbers of enslaved people. Custis set aside the Arlington Estate to be the family seat for himself, his wife, Molly, and their daughter, Mary. He and his enslaved people built Arlington House in sections from 1802 to 1818. Once completed the Greek Revival home served as a showplace for Custis' vast collection of Washington heirlooms. Custis then turned his attention to the development of the Arlington landscape.

At Arlington he set aside approximately 300 acres on the flat plains along the Potomac to serve as his farm. In the fields those enslaved planted corn and wheat. On this portion of the property Custis also established a market garden; a large plot in which the enslaved grew fruits and vegetables to sell in the nearby port towns. The farm also contained pastures and a fishery. Farm buildings included a saddlery, carriage shop, granary, blacksmith, wheelwright's shop, and quarters for the enslaved field hands. Most of the remaining land was set aside as a decorative landscape.



Located along the river was the Arlington Spring which flowed near an enormous oak tree, and was surrounded by locusts, maples, and cedars. The spring was developed as a resort area and included a dance pavilion, kitchen, and dining room. A ferry conveyed visitors between Washington and Arlington Spring. The Alexandria and Georgetown Canal separated the spring from the farm.



The Marquis de Lafayette

Groves of oak, chestnut, and evergreen trees covered the eastern slope of the property, extending from Arlington House down to the farm. The Custis and Lee families referred to this section of the estate as “the Park.” Behind the mansion was a large forest that occupied over 500 acres. The forest consisted of elm, oak, and chestnut trees. The Marquis de Lafayette urged Mrs. Custis to “cherish the trees around your mansion” during his visit to Arlington in 1824. South of the forest was a 17-acre tract of land that belonged to Maria Syphax, a former enslaved woman who received her land and freedom from Custis around 1826.

Adjacent to the north wing of the house was the large kitchen garden that contained both fruit and vegetables. Fruit trees grew along the garden path. The enslaved carried fresh produce from the garden to either of the two kitchens where they prepared meals. Directly south of the house was the flower garden which was the most treasured part of the estate for the ladies of the family. It included roses, dahlias, callas, heliotropes, tulips, and Parmese violets. Each of the four Lee girls had her own corner of the garden to grow her favorite flowers. A latticed arbor with wooden seats stood in the center of the garden. Nearby was the Grove, a less formal flower garden.

From 1802 until his death in 1857, Custis managed the plantation at Arlington. Although Custis devoted much of his time to his artistic endeavors, he did have a keen interest in agricultural improvement. Custis believed, as had George Washington, that the United States should not rely on Europe for agricultural products. He was particularly interested in developing a fine native wool. From 1805 to 1811, Custis sponsored a sheep-shearing contest at Arlington in which the owner of the sheep with the finest wool would win a trophy. He rented his pastures to other planters to allow them to fatten their cattle before selling them at the nearby markets. He believed in crop rotation and the use of fertilizer to improve crop yields. In his later years Custis’s interest in the plantation diminished and by his death in 1857 Arlington was run down and in debt.

Upon Custis’s death his land and his enslaved people passed to his daughter, Mary Custis Lee. Robert E. Lee, the executor of Custis’ will, took a long leave of absence from the army to administer the plantation. Lee managed to clear the estate of debt, repaired farm buildings and roads, and added a new slate roof to the house. He also proved a stricter taskmaster than had Custis. Lee rented out a number of enslaved people and several ran away from Arlington while he was in charge. Eager to return to his army regiment, Lee

convinced his oldest son, to whom the property would pass when Mrs. Lee died, to assume responsibility for Arlington in 1859. At one point Lee declared "I am no farmer."

The vitality of the plantation was determined, in large part, by the contributions of enslaved workers and the plantation mistress. The enslaved made the brick to build the mansion, raised crops, cared for livestock, built roads, and maintained the gardens. The enslaved built a schoolhouse on the property that they later used as a chapel for their own worship services. Some of the enslaved worked primarily in the fields while others worked as enslaved domestics. The Custis and Lee families relied on the enslaved domestics such as Charles Syphax, who oversaw the dining room, to help maintain order and create an atmosphere of hospitality within the Arlington household.

The lady of the plantation also shouldered a heavy load of responsibilities in the daily routine of Arlington. During her lifetime, Mrs. Custis devoted herself to the spiritual wellbeing of all those who lived on the plantation. She was an avid gardener and oversaw the design and care of the formal flower garden. Mrs. Custis, and later Mrs. Lee, was responsible for the education of her own children as well as that of those enslaved, who were eventually to receive their emancipation. Both oversaw the management of the household, which often included the entertainment of guests for long periods. Mrs. Lee spent much of her time caring for her seven children, and parental duties often fell solely on her when army duties took Robert E. Lee away from home. Both women assumed significant responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the estate when their husbands were away from Arlington. Despite their many responsibilities, both women expressed pride and joy in the role they played on the plantation.

The Civil War forever altered the Arlington landscape as well as the lives of those who lived there. On April 20, 1861 Robert E. Lee resigned his commission in the U. S. Army and shortly thereafter entered into Confederate military service. The rest of the Lee family abandoned the plantation in May, 1861. By the end of that month the Union army took possession of the estate. The military occupation signaled the end of the plantation era at Arlington. Soldiers felled much of the forest's virgin timber. Roads, camps, and forts replaced the fields and pastures. Freedman's Village, a camp for the formerly enslaved who fled to Washington in search of a safe haven and employment, was constructed on the southern end of the old plantation. The village contained a school, churches, hospital, and a "home for the indigent." Some of the Custis slaves established new homes in the village, while others left the estate.

In 1864 the Federal government acquired the Arlington estate at auction and established a cemetery for war dead on the property. The vast number of graves irrevocably altered the landscape. When Mildred Lee returned to her childhood home in 1890, nothing remained of the old plantation. "Everywhere, as far as my aching eyes could see, were graves, graves, graves" and the Arlington she remembered "all seemed a dream . . ."