

The Garden Club of Virginia
12 East Franklin Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Virginia's Oldest Garden

BACON'S CASTLE



B A C O N ' S C A S T L E & T H E C A S T L E G A R D E N



BACON'S CASTLE, located south of the James River in the rural and undisturbed Tidewater county of Surry, was built in 1665 by immigrant Arthur Allen. The building, which is a National Historic Landmark, is the finest document for studying three centuries of America's architectural, economic, and social history and has intrigued generations of historians and architects.

The scholarly fascination with Bacon's Castle is fully shared by the public, whose interests range from often retold ghost stories to a keen interest in the building, its style, and its evolution over the centuries. When Bacon's Castle was first opened to the public—in 1974 for Historic Garden Week in Virginia—more than 5,000 people waited in the rain to see this antiquity.

The architectural uniqueness of this building stems from the unusual features that, over the centuries, have become all but extinct in this country. Adding to the atmosphere of great age that envelops the entire plantation setting are the handsome curvilinear or Flemish gables, accented by robust, offset triple chimney stacks.

The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) undertook the commitment to research, restore, furnish, and interpret Bacon's Castle in 1973 by purchasing the building and 40 acres from the Warren estate—nearly three centuries after the 1676 occupation of the Castle by Nathaniel Bacon's rebel army.

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To piece together its sometimes confusing assemblage of history and architecture, the Castle's richly-documented history was undertaken and uncovered during a decade of restoration and extensive study of its occupants over three centuries, the County's history, and period inventories.

1984 In 1985, the Garden Club of Virginia, upon recommendation of its Restoration Committee, generously decided that proceeds from their annual Garden Week in Virginia would go toward the research, restoration of the Castle's gardens. This far-reaching project has received worldwide publicity.

Under the direction of the APVA, archaeologist Nicholas M. Lucchetti supervised the excavation, which turned out to be the most exciting find in the garden history world: the discovery of the remains of outbuildings and a nineteenth-century, an eighteenth-century, and a seventeenth-century garden respectively, all demonstrating the transition of the garden during the entire existence of Bacon's Castle. As Mr. Lucchetti, then with the Virginia Division of Historic Landmarks, commented, "What we found is the largest, earliest, best-preserved, most sophisticated garden that has come to light in North America ... It is a spectacular find, and truly may be a once-in-a-lifetime find."

The archaeological discovery of the circa 1680 garden at Bacon's Castle is an exciting find in the garden history world. Few, if any, 17th century gardens as complete as Bacon's Castle have been found in the United States, making it unique. In fact, there is now documentation for the 17th century garden, parts of the 18th century garden above it, and also a plan of the 19th century garden that prompted the investigation initially. These data, which show the transition of the garden during the entire existence of Bacon's Castle, are extremely valuable.

The plan of the 17th century garden is typical of gardens made from ancient times into the 18th century and even later. It is a grid plan, where an angular and symmetrical walk system comprise the pattern, and the intervening spaces between the walks are planted to garden. In the case of the Bacon's Castle Garden, the central North-South walk is the widest. The base of the walk was found through archaeology; its width was 12 feet. Crosswalks were narrower, only 8 feet wide, and the outer walk that went all around the larger garden plots was 10 feet wide. (See accompanying rendering). All the walks were paved with white sand and curved to shed water.

Within this grid pattern made by the walks were six large planting beds, all 74 feet wide. The four northernmost beds were 98 feet long; the two most southern, 97 feet. The large dimensions of these beds, as well as evidence of long furrows running across the beds and all the way to the edge of the walks, suggest that they were devoted to the production of utilitarian vegetables, and possibly small fruits, rather than to ornamental plants. There was no evidence of large fruit trees having been planted within the plots as was sometimes the case in these early gardens.

North of these six large central beds were two smaller ones, each measuring 20 feet by 86 feet. (See rendering). The edges of these beds fronting the central walk were not square but serpentine, thus forming a bell-shaped end to the long central axis walk. Since there is no evidence of a gate at the end of the walk, this bell-shaped ending may have served as a strong terminus to the walk, especially since there appears to have been a hole within the walk. (See rendering). The rows in these two end beds ran North and South, or perpendicular to those in the larger beds. The fact that these rows would have been only 20 feet long suggests that the gardens were either starting beds or were used for the production of small-scale crops.

The idea that these beds may have been for starting plants, or a nursery, is appealing because there was evidence of a brick wall across the North end of the entire

garden. Starting beds were often associated with brick walls; the wall acted as a solar collector and a wind barrier, making the growing area on the South side of the wall an ideal place to start plants early. Outside the outer walk of the garden was a 6-foot-wide border bed. There is no archaeological evidence of what was grown in these beds. Typically such beds were devoted to small fruits, flowers, herbs, and some trees, probably fruit rather than ornamental. These border beds were broken only to accommodate the extension of walks so that people could enter the garden.

A puzzling feature about this garden is that, aside from the wall across the North end, no 17th century fence lines were found around the rest of the garden. There was evidence of fencing during later periods, however.

Associated with the Bacon's Castle Garden were several structures. The largest was a 20-foot by 32-foot brick building at the East terminus of the Northernmost crosswalk. (See rendering). There is strong evidence that this unit was built at the same time as the garden. The building had a basement with an orange clay floor and white-washed walls. There is no evidence that the building ever had a chimney, suggesting that it may not have been used as a place of habitation. The many fragments of bell jars or cloches, on the other hand, suggest that the use of the building may have been closely associated with the garden.

Along the West side of the garden were three compartments, each serving as termini to the three crosswalks. They were approximately 12 feet square, and were surrounded by a brick wall with a narrow opening on the walk side. The footing for another wall was found 2 feet 6 inches from the rear wall. It has not been determined exactly what these compartments were.

During the medieval period, many similar gardens had enclosed sitting areas, or exedras, in comparable locations along fence lines and at the ends of walks, although it cannot be said with certainty that this is what the Bacon's Castle compartments were.

In the process of investigating the garden archaeologically, several 18th and 19th century features were also found. Well bricks were located at the terminus of the Southernmost crosswalk on the East side. Privy pits, remains of an arbor, and the extant cemetery, all 19th century features indicated on the Hankins plan of the Garden, were also discovered.

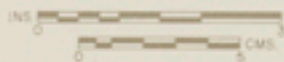
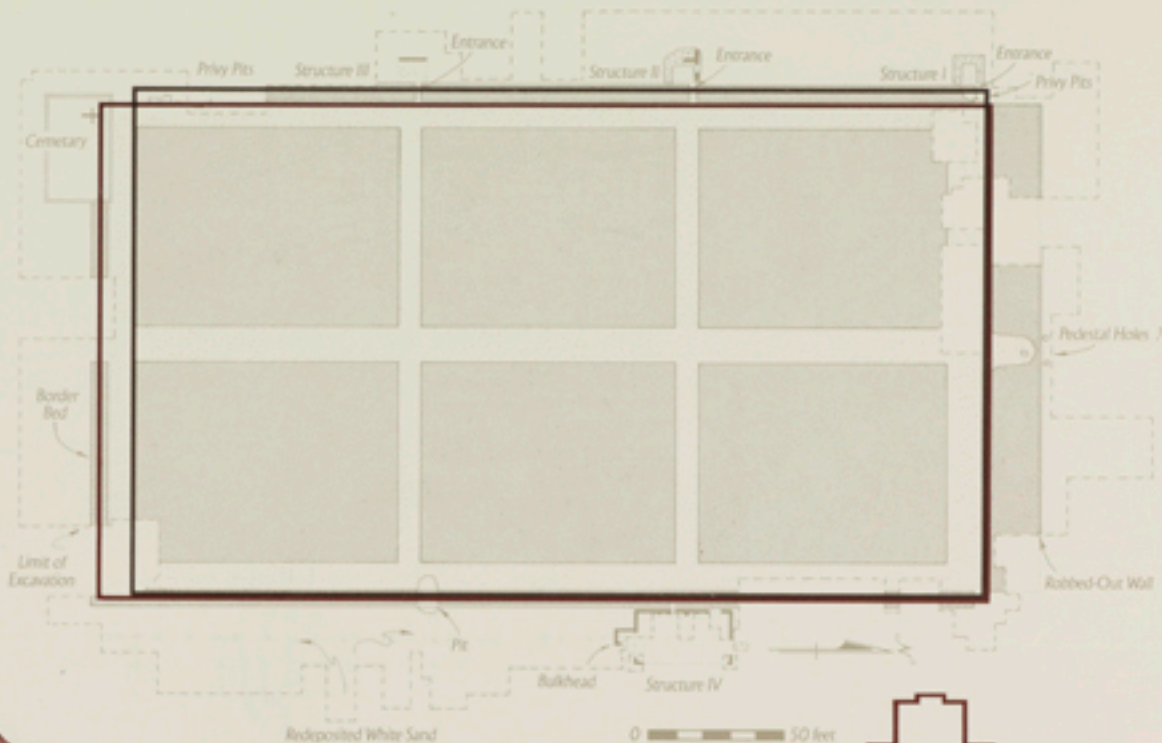
RUDY J. FAVRETTI, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT FOR THE GARDEN CLUB OF VIRGINIA
MAY, 1987

“Having the fairest buildings of the house facing the garden in this manner ... the rooms shall have ... both the sight and scent of whatsoever is excellent, and worthy to give content out from it, which is one of the greatest pleasures a garden can yield its Master.”

John Parkinson

Paradisi In Sole Paradisus Terrestris, 1629

- Garden features dating CA. 1680-1690
- Late 18th Century perimeter
- Perimeter of Hankin's garden: 1854-1871



A wine bottle dating from circa 1680-1710 found in the garden bearing the seal of Arthur Allen II.



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BACON'S CASTLE

Built by Arthur Allen, Bacon's Castle is Virginia's oldest dateable brick dwelling and America's only surviving high Jacobean-style structure. It was occupied by rebel troops in 1676 during Bacon's Rebellion. Later residents included the Allen, Cocke, Robinson, Hankins and Warren families.

Bacon's Castle is located on Route 10 in Surry County and is open year round.

Excavating a pit within the garden that contained fragments of more than 40 wine bottles and several hundred animal bones.







