

Setting it Right

The Tradescants, a Stained Glass Window and the GCV

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A stained glass window at Oxford University commemorates John Tradescant the Younger (1608 – 1662), the “Prince of Gardeners” who followed in the footsteps of his father John Tradescant the Elder (1570s – 1638), the “King of Gardeners.” The window features the Tradescant coat-of-arms wreathed by Virginia spiderwort, named *Tradescantia virginiana* in the elder Tradescant’s honor. With seeds sent from Virginia, Tradescant the Elder introduced the plant to England in the early 1600s. Beneath the spiderwort wreath is a Latin inscription, which loosely translates, “Whom the orchard pleases, honor this man under the auspices of which our Virginia gardens spring.” Dates on either side signify two voyages Tradescant the Younger was believed to have made to Virginia.



© Museum of the History of Science, Oxford.

The stained glass window illuminates a spacious stairwell in the world’s oldest surviving purpose-built public museum building. The building, erected in 1683, now Oxford’s Museum of the History of Science, originally housed the Old Ashmolean Museum. The stained glass window was a gift of Garden Club of Virginia members.

In 1925, Robert T. Gunther, then curator of the Old Ashmolean, received a copy of the Garden Club of America publication, *The Bulletin*. Inside, he found the name of the president of a Virginia chapter, Mrs. Fairfax Harrison (Hetty) of Belvoir. Gunther wrote to Mrs. Harrison on December 3, 1925, to “supplicate for the help of the Presidents of the Virginia Garden Clubs. Do you think they would raise a subscription for such a window to be given to the University of Oxford by them, of course with an appropriate inscription?” He estimated that \$250 would be needed. Mrs. Harrison, a GCV member, made the plea, and GCV members from across the state quickly raised \$345, which would be worth more than 10 times that amount in today’s dollars. The

window was dedicated on November 26, 1926, by the 12th Lord Fairfax of Cameron, who, coincidentally, was related to Mrs. Harrison's husband Fairfax.

Tradescant the Elder was the gardener for some of England's most powerful citizens and, eventually, for King Charles I. By the end of his life, Tradescant had become England's foremost horticulturist and keeper of Great Britain's first botanic garden, known as the Oxford Physic Garden, now the University of Oxford Botanic Garden.

He also collected oddities. An insatiable curiosity took him to Russia, Asia, Africa and all around Europe (although never to America), traveling by any means possible, even sailing with perilous military expeditions. He acquired a dodo bird (its beak and claw still on display), shells, fish, fossils, shoes, weapons, insects, buttons, hats, coins, taxidermy, books, medals, utensils, bones – anything that seemed unique. Reports of his collection of curiosities included a phoenix feather, dragon's eggs and a piece of the True Cross. He especially liked to gather plant specimens from other countries, which he would bring back to England to cultivate for his employers. Tradescant displayed the treasures in his house, known as "the Ark," at South Lambeth near London. He allowed people to view his collection for a fee.

At his death, the elder Tradescant's treasures went to his son. Young John took over his father's job as gardener to the king, and he carried on his father's work collecting rarities. While the exact number of trips Tradescant made to Virginia has been the subject of debate – one, two or three – he did take back to England approximately 200 new plant specimens. These included magnolia, red maple, sycamore, maidenhair fern, columbine, the tulip tree and the bald cypress. Among the rarities, one of his most spectacular acquisitions was a mantle, called a match-coat, which had belonged to Powhatan. It was made of hides of the white-tailed deer, with buttons of shell, and it may be the only surviving example of a match-coat used by the Algonquian Indians of Virginia. It is still on display.

The younger Tradescant, with help, made a catalog of the huge collection he and his father had amassed, *Musaeum Tradescantianum*. Help creating the catalog came from Elias Ashmole (1617 – 1692), who financed its publication. In a Dickensian twist, Ashmole, by some accounts, got Tradescant drunk and convinced him to deed the collection to himself, with the transfer taking place after Tradescant's death. When Tradescant died, his widow contested the will, but lost. Ashmole then used the Tradescants' collection for his own glorification. He donated it, along with a custom-built museum to be named for himself, to Oxford.

The stained glass window made possible by Virginia garden club members helped Oxford honor the Tradescants, perhaps helping square a centuries-old debt owed to that family for the long-ago betrayal. ❁

For more information, read *Strange Blooms: The Curious Lives and Adventures of the John Tradescants* by Jennifer Potter, and *The John Tradescants: Gardeners to the Rose and Lily Queen*, by Prudence Leith-Ross. Philippa Gregory's historical fiction, *Earthly Joys*, is based on Tradescant the Elder, while *Virgin Earth* focuses on Tradescant the Younger.