The Wye House Plantation, the home of the Lloyds on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, is famous for its beautiful gardens and landscape and its still-standing eighteenth-century greenhouse. It is more famous because Frederick Douglass, who was enslaved there as a child, describes the plantation in his autobiographies. As an archaeologist, I have researched and excavated at Wye House for the past five years, focusing on the ways that the landscape can be interpreted from a multitude of perspectives and through complex and interrelated cultural connections. Places are experienced in many different ways depending on race, gender, and other social positions. Our experience of the past is likewise changed according to these identities. The narrative at Wye House, and many other colonial-era sites, has long been dominated by a White male point of view. I ask what we would see if we looked at those famous gardens from the perspectives of marginalized groups, women and enslaved people. The goal of this research is to highlight those overlooked stories and challenge archaeologists and historians to leave behind exclusionary practices and interpretations.

Brought to Wye House against their will, the enslaved community carried with them their own expertise, knowledge, and skills in gardening and agriculture. The standing eighteenth-century greenhouse is one of four gardening-related buildings at Wye House that would have been operational at the same time. Douglass describes those that were in charge of the Wye House gardens as a “scientific gardener, imported from Scotland (a Mr. McDermott) with four men under his direction.” Scientific gardening was defined by an interest in experimentation and improvement of nature through the application of technologies and knowledge. With a hypocaust system in place in the greenhouse, a series of flues carried hot air through the building to heat the delicate plants at precise temperatures. In order to maintain the gardens at Wye House and the multiple gardening buildings, to keep the hypocaust at exact temperatures, and care for a diverse arrangement of plants, these gardeners would have required incredible skill and knowledge. These four men were experienced scientific gardeners, like Mr. McDermott, and experts. Though the structure of slavery did not allow them the same level of control over the garden design as the Lloyds, they were the ones who worked with and understood the plants most directly.

Yard spaces of the enslaved people on plantations have been interpreted as being women and children-dominated spaces (Battle-Baptiste 2010) and others have specifically examined how medicines cultivated from the natural surroundings were used by women (Edwards-Ingram 2005). Whitney Battle-Baptiste (2010) claimed that these yards and garden spaces were actively shaped by women to be extensions of the house in order to create a safe domestic place within the plantation, particularly through a ritualistic sweeping of the yard. Though it is difficult to attach gender to archaeological features alone, there is evidence of a swept yard outside the doorway of a slave quarter attached to the back of the greenhouse.

Although there is no archaeological or historical evidence yet of slave gardens in the yards at the Wye House Plantation, it was common for enslaved people to keep garden plots to supplement diet and even income. This was a responsibility that generally fell to the women on the plantation. Douglass explains the way in which his own grandmother’s talents in the garden gave her significant status in the region:

She was a gardener as well as a fisherwoman, and remarkable for her success in keeping her seedling sweet potatoes through the months of winter, and easily got the reputation of being born to “good luck.” In planting-time Grandmother Betsey was sent for in all directions, simply to place the seedling potatoes in the hills or drills. (Douglass 1882:2)
Douglass gives his grandmother a respected title of gardener, and makes it clear that her abilities were valuable to many others. Although enslaved laborers would have existed under a system that controlled their bodies and movement, there were ways that these men and women claimed the landscape as their own.

Just as it is important to recognize the enslaved populations’ contributions to the gardens of these plantations, it is also necessary to examine the ways in which White women have been excluded. Edward Lloyd IV, owner of Wye House beginning in 1770, passed the property to his wife upon his death in 1796. Elizabeth Tayloe Lloyd was the daughter of John Tayloe II of Mount Airy, which was also home to a similar eighteenth-century greenhouse. The traditional narrative gives Edward Lloyd IV the identity of a scientific gardener, but not Elizabeth Lloyd. It was during his time that most of the gardening-related buildings were built, emphasizing control and experimentation, and there were many natural science, gardening, and agriculture books recorded in his library. It was long assumed that the modifications to the greenhouse and construction of the hypocaust were under his direction. An examination of the historical record shows this not to be the case.

Elizabeth Lloyd maintained an active interest in the gardens after her husband’s death. Her continued involvement is evidenced by payments to seedsellers and the upkeep of repairs to the greenhouse and other garden buildings in the years after 1796. According to financial records and the archaeological evidence, the hypocaust was built between 1798 and 1822 (Pruitt and Leone 2013). This means that Edward Lloyd IV was not alive to oversee the implementation of the hypocaust system in the greenhouse.

According to Barbara Sarudy, it was not uncommon for the ladies of the house to be in control of the greenhouse and kitchen gardens, though they were often not charged with the management of the gardens in their entirety (Sarudy 1998:83). Despite this commonly female involvement in the greenhouse, scientific gardening is often categorized as a male-dominated pursuit from the late eighteenth-century onward. Archaeologists such as Carmen Weber (1996) have recognized the absence of a discussion of women in scientific gardening and noted that they are often overshadowed in history by their male counterparts. In looking at the connections between the Lloyd family and their relative, Margaret Carroll from Mount Clare in Baltimore, Weber discovered that the similarities between the two estates’ greenhouses may reflect an exchange of knowledge and ideas between the women of this extended family (Weber 1996:39-41). The gardens and landscapes of Mount Clare, Mount Airy, and Wye House become linked through the connections and roles of women, and suggests that Mrs. Lloyd could have played a significant part in the greenhouse modifications.

The involvement of Mrs. Lloyd and the enslaved laborers in the scientific gardening at Wye House allows us to shift the focus away from the traditional narrative. In telling the history of botanical experimentation and early scientific gardening, it is important to acknowledge the contributions of women and the enslaved population rather than assuming that the interest and abilities belonged only to White men. Though Edward Lloyd may have been a scientific gardener, there are many others who could also claim this identity.

REFERENCES


