



A BOOK REVIEW

***Founding Gardeners* by Andrea Wulf**

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Founding Gardeners, published in 2011, can be viewed as a companion piece to Ms. Wulf's previous book, *The Brother Gardeners*. The author has the remarkable ability to educate the reader on historical material using her trademark light and engaging style. This book takes us through the relationship and significance of the natural world in the lives of our four founding fathers: Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison. The story weaves in chronological order from the earliest days of our nation and its leaders to the significance of their own beloved "estates" / gardens in their private lives. For those fortunate enough to have visited any or all of these landmarks (Mount Vernon, Peacefield, Monticello, and Montpelier,) it is a special treat to peer inside to see the evolution of each property and the special source of comfort each delivered to its owner. The book also reveals how botany became an almost obsessive interest for these gentlemen. During the Constitutional Congress, for example, the officials would break the business of leading the country with garden tours, "turning to nature for comfort and inspiration." As the

book winds through each administration, the reader is treated to insights regarding the value placed by Washington, for example, on creating a grand center of government as he led the way to shift the nation's capital from Philadelphia to Washington D.C.. followed by Adams who, coming from a radically different political outlook and philosophy, did not embrace the notion of transforming the "swampland" into the central seat of the federal government. Jefferson held office during the Lewis and Clark western excursions, which is detailed nicely in the book. Finally, Madison's administration and subsequent retirement years are most significantly highlighted with his pioneering beliefs and work towards forestry and conservation.

More than anything, this book heightened my appreciation for the dedication and vision of each founding father and their love of the natural world. They were each gifted with many talents and, of course, worked tirelessly to lead our nation through its infancy. However, their keen interest, curiosity and love of botany and landscape design was ever present in their lives. That alone, along with their spouses and families, provided an indisputable healthy diversion, an escape, and a safe harbor. Ms. Wulf provides outstanding background to the various plant material that is "discovered" along the way and subsequently incorporated into their respective landscapes.

The book is a must-read for anyone who would enjoy the combination of early American history mixed with the role that nature, gardening and botanical exploration held in those years. The book is heavily footnoted, along with an exhaustive appendix, and also contains reprints of original schematic drawings of each grand estate of the first four Presidents. Other illustrations include botanical renderings and artwork from the 17th and 18th centuries portraying nature and the respective presidential properties.

In the chapter on the development of our capital, titled "City of Magnificent Intentions," Ms. Wulf reveals

that “instead of holding public parades and parties, the third president waded through swamps and clambered up rocks in order to add a species to his collection.” It’s impossible not to be swayed and charmed to learn of the great power nature held over these leaders. Jefferson was quoted as describing himself in retirement as “tho’ an old man, I am but a young gardener.” Who of us can’t relate also to the sentiment expressed by the author that “gardening and working in his meadows was so important to Adams while he dealt with the pressures of government that he compared it to ‘medicine’”?

Mount Vernon and gardens



Peacefield and gardens



Monticello and gardens



Montpelier and gardens



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