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Charles Willson Peale at Belfield: "Your Garden Must be a Museum"

By **Kateryna A. Rudnytzky**

"These amusements cost some money and much time, the labour gave health, and happiness is the result of constant employment; his inventions pleased himself and they gave pleasure to others and offended none--being perfectly innocent, but the economist will say, time, money, and labour was misspent. He answers that happiness is worth millions."

Such were Charles Willson Peale's fond recollections of his Belfield years as recorded in his Autobiography. Yet Peale's garden brought him much more than happiness; it secured for him a place in the cultural history of a new-born nation. Through his garden at Belfield, Peale commemorated the significant events of the past, immortalized the heroic figures of the present, and laid a sound moral and spiritual foundation for the generations of the future.



Born on the eastern shore of Maryland, Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) grew up in moderately poor circumstances. He became a leading colonial portrait painter, saddler, civic leader, inventor, educator, essayist, silversmith, museum curator, excavator of a mastodon, naturalist, gentleman farmer, and landscape gardener—an "American Leonardo." But it is his portrait painting for which Peale is best known—especially in Philadelphia, where an abundance of his paintings may be seen in public and private collections. As a recent article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* put it, Peale is "second only to Benjamin Franklin as Philadelphia's 18th century Renaissance man."

Peale brought Belfield, "Nieve's Place" as it was then called, in 1810. He took up farming at the age of 69, moving into the country house with his third wife Hannah and five of his younger children. The estate was a larger piece of property than Peale was prepared to buy; the natural beauty of the place, however, made the offer too good to refuse. Peale agreed to a \$7,000 cash down payment and would pay the remaining \$2,500 with interest over the next two years.

Nieve's Place lay three quarters of a mile from Germantown, spanning 104 acres, intersected by the Wingohocking Creek and a smaller stream. Peale was pleased and excited by his purchase and set out immediately to improve the property. A skilled inventor with an unlimited imagination, he soon equipped his farm with machinery of all sorts (apple parer, corn planter, milk cart) and built a cotton mill. His farm yielded wheat, hay, corn, potatoes, assorted vegetables and fruits, and dairy products. Belfield's only profitable product, however, was currant wine; ironically, Peale was against its consumption.

Peale called his new home "Persevere" having purchased the property "by a persevering labour of thirty odd years." His friends, however, felt the name was too solemn, and to accommodate them, Peale renamed his farm "Belfield," to honor his former art instructor John Hesselius, whose plantation was called "Bellefield." Peale's biographer, Charles Coleman Sellers, offers an additional insight into the significance of the name change: "What had been, and remained, earnestly dedicated to the cause of scientific agriculture had become, in fact, a place of amusement, wonder and beauty. Utility was never abandoned, yet admittedly never successful."

Belfield's lack of success was limited to the financial only; in terms of health, happiness, and support of family--and the many other things Peale valued more than profit--Belfield flourished. Despite his unyielding devotion to his many projects and his constant experimentation and expansion, Peale always retained the deep-seated love and support of his children and wife. His son Rubens, in particular, shared his enthusiasm for the garden and spent much time working on it alongside his father. Peale drew strength from his family's patience and encouragement. At the end of each long day, "when he walked up the winding paths in the glow of twilight to his door, weary and aching with work at the machinery, at the planting and digging . . . there always waiting would be Hannah."

Consistent with his deistic beliefs, Peale revered and adored Nature throughout his life, and his interest in this area seems to have superceded and outlasted his love for art. His devotion to Nature and all of God's creations is expressed throughout his papers, as evidenced in the following diary entry:

"I find equal pleasure in seeking for an acquaintance with those little animals whose life, perhaps, is spent on a single leaf, or at most on a single bush. It is diverting to watch a flower as you approach and see the little being watching you. It turns around a twig or part of a flower to avoid your sight, and in an instant drawing in its legs rolls off, sometimes falling from leaf to leaf to get passage to the ground.

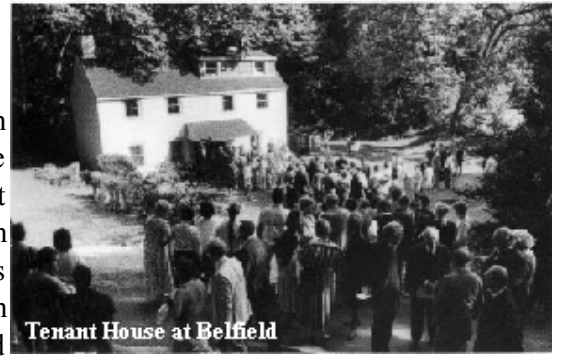
"Yesterday morning I set out to walk several miles before dinner. . . . But in the first meadow I found myself examining the bushes attentively and there I found so much amusement that several hours passed away before I could think of leaving those bewitching animals..."

Peale lived in accordance with these sentiments, sketching landscapes whenever the opportunity arose, reconstructing "natural habitats" to serve as backdrops for the taxidermy exhibits in his museum, making pets of the various animals kept on the grounds of Belfield, and so forth. Certainly, then, he would find Bernard M'Mahon's advice on gardening familiar and encouraging. In his *American Gardener's Calendar*, M'Mahon instructed the novice landscaper to plan the garden "in imitation of nature." In this "best-selling" and widely acclaimed guide, M'Mahon discussed the disappearance of the 17th century formal garden and elaborated upon the "modern" garden. It was to consist of open spaces, winding walks, clumps of bushes, all "in imitation of a natural assemblage."

These views were echoed by George Gregory, whose *Dictionary of Arts and Science* Peale consulted concerning garden ornamentation. Gregory recognized the innate parallels between painting and landscaping. He indicated that "a gardener should be a studier of landscape paintings." As a young man studying in London, Peale was very much taken with William Hogarth's "line of beauty," a slow, repeated, balanced curve present in many of Peale's portraits. Thomas Jefferson, Peale's long-time friend and frequent correspondent on the subject of gardening, was also familiar with Hogarth's philosophy of aesthetics and encouraged the novice farmer to apply the serpentine curve in contour plowing; Peale adopted this advice. It follows then, that the main walk (now the lower driveway at Belfield) sweeps in a gentle serpentine curve towards the mansion. The garden simply became another of Peale's many

canvasses to bear Hogarth's graceful and delicate Line of Beauty.

Peale returned to the city in 1821, heart-broken after Hannah's death. Hoping to devote more time to his Natural History Museum and Portrait Gallery, he sold the farm in 1826 to William Logan Fisher, who gave the property to his daughter Sarah upon her marriage to William Wister. Belfield remained in this family and descended to Daniel Blain Jr., from whom La Salle University purchased it in 1984.



As part of La Salle's campus, Belfield regains its status as a place of discovery, experimentation, and learning. Using his garden as the medium for education, Peale guided his children with paternal advice and also instructed the populace in the ways of the world. Conscious of his role as a founding father of the new-born nation, Peale was determined to preserve a basis of early American culture for posterity. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson dated March 2, 1812, Peale wrote: "Your garden must be a Museum to you." Nearly two centuries ago, Belfield began its journey toward its current status as a historical landmark. Today, what had been a school to Peale's children and a delight to his many visitors, is now a bona fide museum for Peale scholars and an important memorial for all Americans.