

THE PLANTATION AT FORT DEFIANCE

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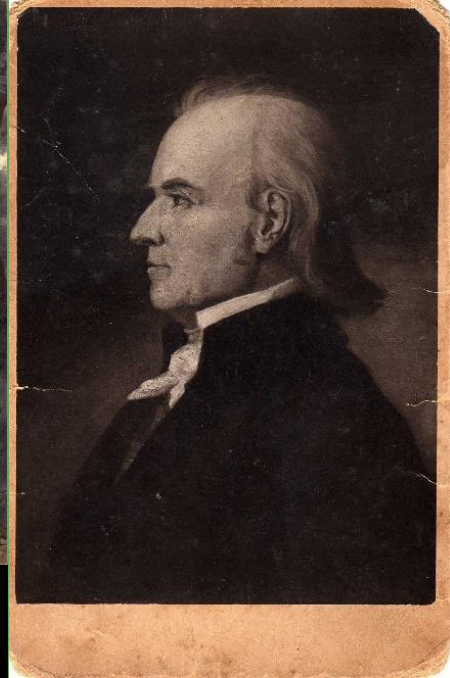
Although a tour of Fort Defiance focuses on the house, many visitors have questions about the plantation. How many acres did the plantation cover? What crops did Lenoir grow? Some knowledge about the plantation lands, as well as Lenoir's agricultural practices in managing these lands, can aid in an interpretation of the entire Fort Defiance site.

Washington and Lenoir

The Fort Defiance house was constructed during George Washington's administration, and, like many Americans of his time, William Lenoir greatly admired our first president. Volunteers at Fort Defiance are familiar with the Mt. Vernon painting Lenoir owned, as well as the framed Washington autograph that Lenoir acquired and considered one of his most valuable possessions. Although Washington and Lenoir never met, their lives exhibit a number of parallels and corresponding events, especially concerning the management of their plantations. Both men served in the Revolutionary War, became political leaders after the War, and were honored for their public service by having a city named after them. But perhaps the greatest similarity between the two men had to do with their attitude and approach toward their plantations. Each utilized his lands for more than a single cash crop by experimenting with a variety of crops and related businesses. Unlike many of their farming neighbors, Lenoir and Washington were also entrepreneurs who explored various means of adding value to the crops they grew.



Like George Washington (above), William Lenoir (right) diversified the crops on his farm, including growing wheat.



Land Speculation and Tenant Farming

Both William Lenoir and George Washington began their careers as surveyors and land speculators. Because Lenoir arrived in northwestern North Carolina a few years before widespread settlement of the area, he was able to acquire thousands of untouched acres (10,250 acres in 1780), eventually selling much of it to settlers who would develop the land themselves for agriculture. Before he sold land, however, Lenoir frequently would rent a land parcel to a tenant in order to prepare the land for farming, and thus increase its value. His records frequently refer to contracts whereby tenants were required to clear the land, erect a fence, build a cabin, plant fruit trees, and pay him a portion of the crop (usually corn) for each acre planted. Consequently, as long as the tenant lived on the property, Lenoir had a steady source of income from the land. If, however, the tenant left the area and moved west (which happened quite often), Lenoir could sell the land at a considerable profit because the tenant had made the required improvements, thus increasing the value of the land. In this manner, Lenoir received agricultural income from hundreds of acres, without being directly involved in all the crop production himself.

The fact that Lenoir owned thousands of acres of speculative lands, and rented many acres to tenants, obscures the size of the Fort Defiance plantation itself (i.e. the acreage where Lenoir was directly involved in its cultivation). The acreage of the original tract on which the Fort Defiance house was built might be a clue to the plantation's size. When Lenoir purchased the tract of land that included the old fort, it consisted of two hundred acres. Although not conclusive, two hundred acres in agricultural production seems to fit with Lenoir's descriptions of his farming activities.

Another possible way to gauge the size of the Fort Defiance plantation is to look at the number of slaves. The assumption can be made that as more land was cultivated, more slaves would be needed. In 1780 Lenoir owned three slaves and acquired an additional one by 1784. By 1790, 12 slaves lived and worked at Fort Defiance. This number increased to 25, eight years later. By the 1820s, Lenoir was becoming elderly

and apparently began to diminish the scale of his various enterprises. He distributed land to his children and reduced the number of his slaves to 17. When Lenoir's son, Thomas, returned to manage Fort Defiance, the plantation enterprises seem to rebound, as the records show that the number of slaves increased to 52 in 1831. In summary, an analysis of slave numbers implies that the size of the Fort Defiance plantation probably varied over the years.

Tobacco

Throughout the colonial period and into the early national era, tobacco was a major cash crop in the Chesapeake area and the Carolinas. Like George Washington and other counterparts in the east, Lenoir grew a substantial crop of tobacco on his plantation. Fayetteville is frequently mentioned in his records as the market for the crop- being traded there for salt, molasses, and household goods. Lenoir apparently had several market options for tobacco. A trip to Richmond Virginia on another matter provided him a chance to sell his tobacco there as well.

Tobacco production had drawbacks. The plant drained the soil of nutrients, requiring planters to frequently prepare fresh ground in order to keep yields at the same levels as previous years. In addition, dependence on a single crop was a gamble, as market conditions and prices fluctuated. Both Washington and Lenoir recognized these facts and began to diversify their plantations. Such an approach was unusual at the time, as most planters were unwilling to risk investing in a different crop. Tobacco could be a gamble, but its familiarity made it seem less risky than an unknown crop. Washington, however, soon minimized his tobacco production; and by 1822, a listing of the major crops at Fort Defiance did not include tobacco.

Corn in Many Forms



As Washington and Lenoir began to diversify their agricultural production, Washington emphasized wheat production, while Lenoir found corn to be a lucrative crop. Corn is usually perceived as a subsistence crop- grown to feed the family, slaves, and livestock. Nevertheless the grain also proved to be a significant source of income for Lenoir. Like tobacco, Lenoir could use com as currency to buy other goods. Corn grown at Fort Defiance was traded for goods, both locally as well as in Fayetteville and Hillsborough. A considerable amount of corn was sold to his neighbors. In 1807 a drought reduced crop yields in the Yadkin Valley. Shrader

notes, "In order to encourage his neighbors to save their own crops and to keep them from pestering him about buying his corn, William circulated a rumor that he might sell corn for the high price of \$2 per bushel. Few buyers came to Fort Defiance that summer to buy produce, but those who did were surprised to find that Lenoir only charged \$1 per bushel."

Visitors to the modern-day Mt. Vernon historical site will find a reconstructed distillery, built to interpret another one of George Washington's endeavors- whiskey production. William Lenoir also discovered that

his corn was more lucrative as a value- added product; i.e. when it was transformed into meal or whiskey. In 1783, Lenoir constructed a gristmill to process his corn crop into meal (he also built a sawmill at the same time). He turned the mill into a business as well; milling his neighbors' corn for a portion of the finished product. A few years later, in 1786, Lenoir found yet another use for his corn crop. At the end of the Revolution, the British were not inclined to accommodate American interests. Americans were unable to trade in the British West Indies, and thus, were unable to import rum- a popular drink at the time. Consequently, whiskey, made from corn or rye, became popular among the former colonists. Like Washington, Lenoir took advantage of the trade situation, constructed his own distillery, and soon was selling corn in liquid form. The production of corn & whiskey literally fed another agricultural enterprise- hogs. Corn mash, a byproduct of whiskey-making, was readily consumed by hogs and proved to be an excellent means of fattening the livestock before slaughter.

Fruits



Brandy, a distilled product of fruit, also proved to be profitable. Fruit production was an important component of the Fort Defiance plantation, both for the fruit itself and for its use in Lenoir's liquor production. Peaches are mentioned in connection with brandy more than any other fruit, probably because the fruit could be grown so easily. The peach was an Old World fruit that grew prolifically when introduced to the Americas. Orchards planted with hundreds of trees would produce bountiful yields with little care in the eighteenth century. The quality of the peaches was of no concern as they were often fed to livestock or crushed to extract the juice. Apple production, on the other hand, required more effort to produce a useful product. Lenoir experimented with different varieties. His records mention two - 1) "Father Abraham" a popular variety of his time that is still cultivated today; and 2) "General's Apple," probably a local seedling variety that Lenoir named himself, after receiving it from General Joseph McDowell. Lenoir frequently required his tenants to

plant peach and apples orchards as a term of their tenancy. One agreement specified that the tenant would plant "100 apple trees and a peach orchard."

Horses

Horseracing was a popular 18th century sport in the South, and both Washington and Lenoir found racehorses to be a profitable part of their farming enterprises. Lenoir received many inquiries whenever he announced that his thoroughbred, Young Whirligig, was available for stud. Some equestrians in the area would apparently go to any length to own a Lenoir horse. In 1786, Lenoir's bay horse disappeared.



His neighbors reported seeing a young man from another community with it. Lenoir followed several leads, crossed the Blue Ridge into present-day Watauga County, found the thief, and discovered that the man had stolen, not only the bay horse, but also a sorrel horse that Lenoir had not even realized was missing!

A plantation, by definition, implies the production of a single crop. Fort Defiance, however, cannot be defined by a single crop, and William Lenoir was not a typical planter. Seeing opportunities beyond conventional

tobacco production, he expanded his plantation to include a variety of crops and livestock for the market. In addition to the enterprises described above, Lenoir's records also show a substantial amount of wheat, rye, oats, and flax being grown at Fort Defiance. Although William Lenoir probably had little knowledge of George Washington's plantation management strategy, the fact that the two men shared a similar approach is noteworthy. Both aimed, not only to diversify their crops and livestock, but also to increase their income by processing their raw commodities into more finished products. Had William Lenoir realized how much he had in common with Washington, his admiration for the man, no doubt, would have been even greater.

The source material for this article came primarily from Richard Shrader's UNC-Chapel Hill Ph.D thesis "William Lenoir, 1751-1839." Information on Washington's plantation was drawn from George Washington: Pioneer Farmer, by Alan & Donna Jean Fusonie.