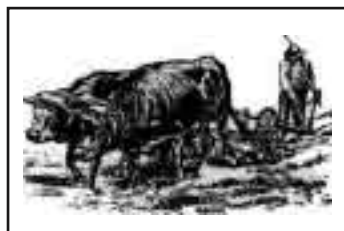




James Madison
Museum

James Madison: An Eye for Farming

The Beginnings of a Great Plantation



Ambrose Madison, grandfather of James Madison, owned over 5,000 acres of land in the Tidewater Region of Virginia in 1728. The thin and quickly exhausted soil of the Tidewater region caused Ambrose to look towards more promising land in Orange County. In 1723, Ambrose Madison was patented half of a 4,675 acre tract in Orange County by James Taylor, his father-in-law. This land consisted of red soil that was a fertile clay loam. The

land also possessed dense forests, gently rolling hills that were readily cultivated, and deeply gullied streams. In areas along the eastern side of the plantation, the Southwest Mountains created rugged terrain.

By 1757 James Madison Senior was running the plantation and it had grown to almost 4,000 acres. Daily life was centered on the farm, and the rough utilitarian house the Madison's lived in reflected this reality. It wasn't until 1760—after years of hard work and planning—that the mansion was built.

As the eldest son, James Madison should have automatically been the heir to the farm. However, his political and scholarly work removed him from it. Madison's younger brother, Ambrose, became the capable heir to the responsibilities of the farm. Ambrose began managing Montpelier while taking over the family affairs and enterprises. With Ambrose's early death in 1793, however, farm responsibilities transferred back to James Madison.

James Madison received the Montpelier mansion, 100 slaves, and 5,000 acres of land from his father's estate. He quickly became committed to making the plantation productive and made Montpelier his permanent residence by 1800.

The Agricultural Society of Albemarle

James Madison became president of the society in 1818. Madison, along with Thomas Jefferson, hoped to use the society to create a model of scientific farming—as well as provide a practical, self-help organization. Through the society, they sought to save Southern agriculture with an over-arching goal of sustaining a rural and republican virtue in country life.

"...The person who united with other science the greatest agricultural knowledge of any man he knew was Mr. Madison. He was the best farmer in the world."

- Thomas Jefferson to John Quincy Adams, November 3, 1807

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129 CAROLINE ST.
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James Madison:

An Eye for Farming

Scientific Farming

James Madison received an education from Princeton University, where he focused on modern science and cultivated a desire to invent farming techniques that would yield a more prosperous product while maintaining land fertility.

In the 1790s James Madison's letters to his father reveal his quest to develop new farming methods. He focused on testing new seeds; he also experimented with inter-planting grain and fruit trees. He believed contour plowing was beneficial to Orange County because it worked well with Indian corn and the red soil. He built dams, mills, and tools to aid in farming. Most importantly, he developed a seven-year crop rotation cycle. In this cycle corn, wheat, peas, potatoes, and vetches are planted for five years while clover is planted for the remaining two years. During this time, Madison visited Orange County and encouraged farmers in the area to use scientific farming methods.

Madison's main focus was experimentation with animal manure, grain chaff, and corn stalks as soil rejuvenators. He believed that chemical fertilizers would be the salvation of Southern agriculture. He advocated irrigation systems and maintaining ten acres of forested lands, which could provide fuel.

Madison viewed the ox as a superior animal than the horse for farming. He also encouraged farmers to get rid of all their scraggly animals, as the cost of feeding them was greater than the return. He suggested keeping only a few fat cows instead. James Madison also kept weather diaries, in which he conducted a ten-year experiment. His goals were to better understand temperature variations caused by altitude, latitude, and distance from the sea.

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Slavery

Slavery was a Southern tradition and was practiced on the Madison plantation. James Madison's father owned 118 slaves. Unlike most plantations of the time, slaves were treated well by the Madisons—often being referred to as, "part of the family." While growing up, James Madison played with both black and white children. This fact becomes reflected in James Madison's abhorrence of slavery.

Madison continued his father's humane treatment of slaves, yet his dependence on them increased. He told one of his overseers, "treat the Negroes with all the humanity and kindness consistent with their necessary subordination and work."

In his later years Madison believed strongly in the American Colonization Society and gradual abolition of slavery. In his last years he attempted to free his slaves, but his increasing amount of debt caused him to sell some of them instead.