



The Daffodils of Gloucester

In Gloucester County, Virginia, lie ancient fields of gilded glory. . .rivers of yellow blossoms which are able to impart sheer “awe” and utter delight at the sight of them in their wild abundance! As in generations past, these blossoms break forth in a glorious symphony of riotous color, as daffodils in every shade and variation of yellow, orange, red, white and pink awaken from their sleep.

These lovely sentinels of spring bear witness to the lives of Gloucester’s first families and settlers. As well they speak of the lives of those men, women and children with “visions of daffodils” who turned Gloucester County into “The Daffodil Capital of America.”

The very first daffodils arrive in Colonial Gloucester

Gloucester’s early daffodil gardeners were women who carried their precious cargo as reminders of home and gardens left behind, knowing that they would never see their native land or family again. It is said that these daffodil bulbs were sewn into the hems of their skirts, dresses and clothes. With all of the hardships and challenges they surely faced, one can only imagine the pure joy they must have experienced when the daffodils they brought with them, bloomed in Virginia soil for the very first time.

The sandy loam soil and Tidewater Virginia growing conditions proved to be just what these early imports needed. As a result the brilliant daffodils thrived, multiplying and naturalizing where ever they were planted. Once here and easily established they were passed from neighbor to neighbor and friend to friend, easily escaping to the countryside, where many of them remain to this day.

By the late 19th century daffodils were growing wild in Gloucester and Mathews County. Many of these

daffodils were the great golden varieties, such as Trumpet Major, which are still so popular today. Their pronounced trumpet and brilliant yellow color enables them to be seen for long distances, particularly when grown in masses. Out of the widespread abundance of these blooms, eventually grew the daffodil industry in Gloucester, which still plays a vital role in the cultivation and sale of daffodils, throughout the United States and the world.

Primary Modes of Transportation

For generations the people of the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula relied on transportation by water to the ports of Baltimore and Norfolk for their buying, selling and cultural activities. Many of our elderly family members and family friends, having grown up in this area, can still recall the excursions by steamboat that were made as they were children and young adults to the ports of Baltimore and Norfolk, for business, shopping or pleasure. Transportation by coastal rivers and the Chesapeake Bay was vital to people and businesses that relied on domestic and international imports and exports. The water provided an abundant food supply as well. The roads in the area connected towns and villages, but had their limits.

“Visions of Daffodils” – the early entrepreneurs

Mrs. Eleanor Linthicum Smith, who lived at Toddsbury, was the first person from Gloucester, to ship daffodils to Baltimore, for resale. Obviously being an entrepreneur at heart, the location of Toddsbury on the North River and the vantage point it provided her, ignited the spark of opportunity and imagination. Around 1890 Mrs. Smith began cultivating her daffodils in large beds, paying local children to pick them for her. These daffodils were then packed, standing up, in laundry baskets and carefully prepared for their journey to

Baltimore. She initially shipped over one hundred baskets containing over 2500 blooms from Dixondale Wharf on the North River. The daffodils were shipped to her son in Baltimore, who sold them to the newsboys at Union Station, for re-sale.

Eventually, Mrs. Smith, was able to pay off the mortgage on her home with the profits she received from the sale of her daffodils. She later moved to nearby "Holly Hill" along with her bulbs. Because of her success as a daffodil farmer, other people in the county began to inquire as to how they could begin their own daffodil enterprises.

The daffodil industry in Gloucester expands . . .

New industries beget new entrepreneurs, who bring innovation and continued expansion along with them. The daffodil farming families that figured prominently in the Gloucester daffodil industry were the Clement, Emory's, Heaths, Hicks, Hammers and Hopkins. There were also other flower farms who contributed to the daffodil industry in Gloucester as well. Their businesses were vital to the people of Gloucester, who relied on them for employment. As a by-product, daffodils continued to grow and permeate the countryside, adding to the natural beauty of the area.

With the exception of Baltimore, Dutch bulbs dominated the east coast daffodil market until 1926. At that time a microscopic worm infestation occurred in Holland, which resulted in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's embargo on foreign bulb importation. This gave an astounding boost to the Gloucester grown daffodils.

From Cantaloupes to Daffodils. . .a daffodil dynasty is born

Charles Heath was from a wealthy New England family and made his home in New York. A simple

cantaloupe changed not only the course of his life, but daffodils in Gloucester forever.

While having breakfast, one morning, his butler served him a delicious cantaloupe that so impressed him, he was determined to find out where it had come from. From his "brownstone" in New York City, he traced the source of this delicious cantaloupe to Elmington in Gloucester, Virginia. Mr. Heath began correspondence with Mr. Thomas Dixon the owner of Elmington, who was a gentleman farmer and author. Having placed orders for more cantaloupes, Mr. Dixon eventually invited Charles Heath to Gloucester for a visit. It was a visit that would change his life and the daffodil industry in Gloucester.

Having come from the city, the gilded fields of Gloucester must have been mesmerizing and awe inspiring to Charles Heath. Shortly thereafter, he purchased Auburn Plantation, in Mathews County and established his family there. Having an appreciation for Dutch bulbs, he began importing them from M. Van Waveren and Sons, in New York, around 1915, to plant in his commercial daffodil fields.

During the Dutch bulb embargo, of 1926 the firm of M. Van Waveren and Sons needed a supplier outside of Holland. They approached Charles Heath and leased 300 acres at Auburn for the cultivation of their Dutch bulb varieties. As the Dutch were not able to communicate or work well with the local workers, Charles Heath's son, George, returned home to take over the family business. George Heath learned everything he could about the business and bulb farming, proving himself to be an excellent manager and businessman.

Eventually Heath was able to convince other growers in the area to work with him, growing the Dutch varieties of daffodils. What ensued was one of the most successful industries in the history of

Gloucester County. Daffodils were big business and their payroll of \$20,000 helped many Gloucester families survive during the great depression era.

The legacy of Charles Heath and what he brought to the area and to the world of daffodils continues to this very day, as Brent Heath and his wife Becky have expanded the family business beyond anything his Grandfather Charles' could have ever imagined.

Daffodils become a tourist industry

In 1938 the first "Narcissus Tour" was held March 18 – April 9, 1938. It was estimated that 3,000 people took the tour and came from the states and cities of New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia, Maryland, Boston, Cleveland and Detroit. The Dutch bulbs figured so prominently in Gloucester's daffodil industry, that in 1940[,] the theme of the tour was "Life in Holland." In partnership with the Virginia Department of Commerce a newsreel film entitled "The Daffodil Story" was produced among the local daffodil fields along with 30 girls dressed in traditional Dutch costumes. As a result of the 1940 newsreel the National Geographic Magazine sent photographers to cover the "Life in Holland" tour. The following year, with the advent of World War II, the 1941 festival was scaled down. In 1942 the tour and festivities were discontinued.

The Daffodil Festival is reborn. . .

In the late 1980's local beautification efforts and the desire to celebrate the Daffodils of Gloucester, once again began when an area mother wanted to plant some daffodils at her children's school. After speaking with the Heath's they agreed to donate the bulbs if she would help them with a community wide beautification effort that included planting daffodils and other flowering bulbs on the grounds of every school in Gloucester County. Each student

was given a bulb to take home and plant. Brent and Becky Heath generously donated the bulbs, as local garden clubs and civic groups were partnered with the schools. Each school had a partner and sponsor, which once again ignited the enthusiasm for daffodils among Gloucester's youth. The enthusiasm and excitement was contagious, as daffodils were once again celebrated by young and old, on a county wide scale.

The Daffodil Festival returned in 1987

Community leaders in partnership with the Gloucester County Department of Parks and Recreation worked together to bring back the festival, which will celebrate its 23rd year, this year. The festival will be held on March 28 & 29, 2009, rain or shine and celebrates the unique heritage of Gloucester and the daffodil industry which is so entrenched in Gloucester history.

More information on the Daffodil Festival can be found online at www.gloucesterva.info. The two day festival includes parades, foods, art, music, clowns, vendors and of course Daffodils.

The 59th Annual Daffodil Show – March 28th and 29th

For over fifty-nine years, longer than any other event celebrating the daffodils of Gloucester, the Garden Club of Gloucester has held its annual Daffodil Show. This show is something you won't want to miss, as people come from all over to enter their horticultural, artistic and photographic entries in the show. This year's show will be held at Page Middle School in Gloucester.

The Artistic Division theme this year is: "Art in Bloom" – interpreting works of art through flower arranging. There will be eleven artistic classes and also a Junior Artistic Division. The Junior Division is "Art in Bloom"- based on the work of Matisse and Picasso."

The Horticulture Division will include a dazzling array of daffodil specimens. An astounding 1800 blooms were entered in last year's horticultural division show, making it one of the largest shows in the United States. There are very few places that you can go to view so many exquisite varieties of daffodils in one place. The Garden Club of Gloucester show is an accredited American Daffodil Society show and one of the best shows anywhere. "Daffodils aren't just yellow anymore," so come enter or enjoy the show. . . . It is open to both experts and novices alike! There is no fee to enter the show, although donations or a "green offering" are always accepted and appreciated. Complete show information is available at various locations in Gloucester and by request. To receive complete show and registration information by mail, call Sue Zima at 804-642-5270.

In closing, Gloucester County is graced with amazing water views and breathtaking landscapes. Take an early springtime drive down the winding country roads and it will be impossible to go very far at all without being introduced to the daffodils of Gloucester. The charming courthouse green is home to one of the oldest courthouses in the nation. Gloucester's historic main street is utterly charming and offers many unique shops and restaurants that make the perfect day trip with your sweetheart or friends. Historic icons and landmarks abound in Gloucester. They include Toddsbury, Warner Hall, the Rosewell ruins, Abingdon and Ware churches, Walter Reed's birthplace, Little England, and so many other unique and wonderful places. A ride through the Gloucester countryside will make your day when the daffodils are in bloom. Special thanks to old friends and new friends. . . Karen Malo, Sue Perrin, Peggy Bowditch, Petie Matheson, Ann Hohenberger, Mary Montague, Elizabeth and Ceci Brown, Cam Williams, the Ladies of The Garden Club of Gloucester, Gloucester County Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism and Becky Heath.

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Jack and Graham Malo at Carousel



Daffodils on display at Brent and Becky's Bulbs



Children's entries in the 2009 Annual Daffodil Festival Flower Show

