



## National Colonial Farm in Piscataway Park: Green History, Farming, and the Quest for Relevance

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*A place of wild fruit  
Where land and people are one  
Our journey begins.*

Accokeek is an Algonquian word that means “place of wild fruit.” The haiku I just shared was written by participants in a gathering that we had this spring—a Dialogue on Race, Agriculture and Living History. A new strategic plan developed three years ago by Accokeek Foundation board and staff prioritized uniting all of the Foundation’s work under the interpretive message of sustainability to better focus how we engage visitors on the acres we steward in this national park on the Potomac River. Everything came under scrutiny, including our “main attraction,” the National Colonial Farm. Our living history scenario’s inclusion of an enslaved character was cutting edge twenty years ago, but now? Now we had an interpreter telling us that current events had made it too uncomfortable for her to play an enslaved character, and a high school agricultural intern hiding any time visitors came on to the colonial farm for fear they would think he was “playing a slave.”

This year the Accokeek Foundation celebrates sixty years of stewardship. Stewardship and sustainability—two words I spend a lot of time contemplating as leader of this non-profit partner of the National Park Service (NPS). When Congresswoman Frances Bolton created the Foundation sixty years ago, donating a farm she had purchased to save the land from development and preserve the view from George Washington’s Mount Vernon across the Potomac River, she effectively launched one of the country’s first public-private land preservation projects. In the end, nearly 5,000 acres would be permanently protected as a national park of which the Foundation stewards 200.

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Sixty years has seen a lot of change in the world. In order for any organization to be sustainable, it must remain relevant. Today I want to share the story of the Accokeek Foundation’s quest to ensure the relevance of its work on this landscape. By sharing some of our story, I hope you will come away with new insights on your own work as we all “look to the past to chart a path forward.”

From the very beginning, innovation has been a core value for the Accokeek Foundation. Recognizing that responsible stewardship of protected land required a vision for that stewardship, the Foundation created the National Colonial Farm in 1958, one of the first living history farms in the country. Building on this landscape’s centuries of agricultural history, the colonial farm started out as a demonstration space for colonial agriculture with preservation of genetic diversity an important focus. Eventually a historic farmhouse and tobacco barn were moved from nearby counties, creating a farmstead and providing an approximation of an ordinary colonial farm family’s life, easily contrasted against the story told at George Washington’s Mount Vernon across the river. The interpretive scenario, based on ground-breaking scholarship by top historians in the early 1990s, continues to anchor the living history interpretation at the colonial farm.

Twenty-five years ago we broadened our approach to engaging the public in agriculture with a bold experiment. We took an eight-acre piece of land depleted by centuries of mono-cropping tobacco and corn, and created the Ecosystem Farm. Could we rebuild the soil through sustainable agriculture? The Ecosystem Farm became one of the first organic vegetable farms in the region, with one of the first farmer training programs and one of the first Community Supported Agriculture programs.

Fast forward twenty years. In the process of working with a consultant to examine the feasibility of expanding the Foundation’s sustainable agriculture work to land outside of the park, several things became evident. Once on the cutting edge, the Accokeek Foundation was no longer a leader in sustainable agriculture in the region. Organic vegetable farms had proliferated, and many programs now existed to help train new farmers. Though our local community enjoyed having a Community Supported Agriculture program just down the road, providing weekly shares of vegetables had never been the goal of our program—producing more farmers had been the goal. With the many new learning opportunities for aspiring farmers, our twenty-year-old model was no longer innovative. Expanding beyond the boundaries of the park was beyond our institutional capacity. How could we most effectively use our limited resources to engage the public in sustainable agriculture in Piscataway Park?

You know how when you begin tugging on a loose thread, a sweater starts to unravel? In this case, eliminating our farmer training program was that loose thread. It was our shifting of the Ecosystem Farm from a production-oriented farmer training program to a space for engaging students and the general public in sustainable agriculture that started our unraveling of “what had been” and beginning to knit “what could be.” Nothing was off the table. “Nothing” included the National Colonial Farm and its interpretation.

With new strategic priorities of unifying all of our work under the umbrella of sustainability and creating programs that are thought-provoking, participatory, and inclusive of different perspectives, the first big change was in our school programs. We eliminated our three field trips focused on colonial farm life on the eve of the American Revolution, and created one new interactive experience called “Eco Explorer: Colonial Time Warp.” As members of an eco-explorer team, students embark on a mission to save the earth and change the course of history. A well-meaning

time traveler has recently transported back to the year 1770 to give our colonial farm family several modern objects that will make their lives easier. But, if left on the farm, these objects could set in motion a chain of events that destroys the environment for future generations. Students “travel back” to 1770, find the objects, weigh the positive and negative effects of these modern conveniences and decide whether to confiscate the objects and replace them with colonial objects that fill the same function. Along the way they encounter characters who humanize the impact of these decisions, including the enslaved character of Cate whose discovery of insecticide promises to make her life in the tobacco fields much easier and perhaps enable her to visit her young son who had been sold to another planter (Figure 1).

This new program represented a big change for our staff, and one not universally embraced. We lost most of our part-time interpreters and one full-time staff member. In the beginning, it also took a toll on our bookings, as teachers accustomed to ticking off the “colonial history” box had to rethink where and how they connected this field trip to their curriculum. But the tour went on to earn the American Alliance of Museum’s Innovation in Museum Education Award, and has been growing in popularity with Maryland teachers. The field trip provides a “Meaningful Watershed Experience” in the Chesapeake, which is now a part of our state’s environmental literacy graduation requirements.

This new school program helped us begin to reframe our approach to engaging all visitors to the site as “green history.” Green history connects a contemporary sustainability issue to its colonial

**Figure 1.** Students meet enslaved character Cate on their journey to save the planet in EcoExplorer: Colonial Time Warp field trip (photo credit: Accokeek Foundation).



equivalent, making it more relevant to today's visitors. Designed and curated on the themes of soil, water, energy, and food waste, our green history uses simple exhibits and interactive theatrical experiences to transform visitors into informed decision-makers regarding today's environmental issues. For example, "Underspace: The Science of Soil" provides visitors with an immersive, glow-in-the-dark exploration of the difference between healthy and unhealthy soil. Then they are encouraged to visit the colonial farm and learn about the challenges of life as a tobacco planter.

The next new program we launched was the Agriculture Conservation Corps, a seven-week paid summer internship for county high school students during which they learn about all aspects of the Foundation's agricultural work—colonial, sustainable, and heritage breed livestock. As we prepare for our third summer with these interns, the ACC represents a strong partnership between the Accokeek Foundation, the public school system, and our county's summer youth employment program. It has also led to a spin-off called AgLab that engages both high school and college students in individual projects during the school year, and has led to new partnerships with individual high schools, as well as Prince George's Community College, the University of Maryland, and the Maryland Institute College of Art.

I began this paper mentioning our recent "Dialogue on Race, Agriculture, and Living History." The idea for this conversation evolved out of our desire to "de-colonize" the colonial farm. Were we inadvertently perpetuating stereotypes through our interpretation at the National Colonial Farm? Like most living history sites that address slavery, the white family is the center of our story. What other stories should we or could we tell against the backdrop of our colonial farmstead? And, given that Piscataway Park encompasses the sacred homeland of the Piscataway people, how do we ensure that visitors learn about this important and continuing story of the landscape? We are just beginning to analyze the material that we gathered during the dialogue and to formulate possible next steps in how we approach interpretation at the National Colonial Farm.

But we have begun formulating a very exciting new initiative that is transforming how we approach our stewardship of this landscape. Our vision is to showcase the future of sustainability with the world's largest permaculture food forest. Drawing on both ancestral knowledge and modern innovation, our goal is to find a true path to sustainability that is centered on patterns of nature and ecologically-oriented agriculture. In the tradition of Piscataway Park's original and enduring inhabitants, our goal is to transform these invasive-choked woodlands into a forest of food that will serve as a living case study in a different kind of working farm-scape. We see this as an opportunity to engage local, regional, and national communities in hands-on learning to create and manage permaculture landscapes. Unique elements of this national food forest include the following:

- agricultural systems that build an edible landscape, layers of native trees and perennials, into the existing forest;
- heritage livestock and plants bred to excel with minimal intervention in the native ecosystem;
- extensive use of silvopasture, combining forestry and grazing of domesticated animals in a mutually beneficial way that enhances soil protection; and
- a national park landscape that serves both as a recreational, leisure, educational, and conservation asset and as a working farm.

It is an ambitious undertaking. With the NPS, we are currently working through the development of a management plan for the 200 acres of the park that we steward. The NPS is learning about

food forests and permaculture, and we are learning about the federal rules and regulations that must be navigated on this archaeologically significant landscape. I am excited about the possibilities. Not only does this food forest approach to agriculture and land stewardship build on everything that the Accokeek Foundation has done for the last sixty years, it also honors the park's significance as indigenous cultural landscape of the Piscataway people. I welcome your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions.

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