

TOBACCO IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

“Prince George’s County is a section of rich tobacco lands making possible comfort and prosperity,...and its sale affects the whole economic life of the county.”

EFFIE GWYNN BOWIE, *ACROSS THE YEARS*, 1947

TOBACCO WAS GROWN IN THE AGRICULTURAL FIELDS SURROUNDING BEECHWOOD HOUSE UNTIL THE 1980s. TOBACCO WAS THE MAJOR CASH CROP IN PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY FROM ITS FOUNDING IN 1696 UNTIL 2000. TYPE 32, *NICOTIANA TABACUM*, THE MOST COMMON SPECIES CULTIVATED IN MARYLAND, HAD A LIGHT COLOR, A SWEET SCENT, AND GOOD BURNING QUALITIES.

TOBACCO CULTIVATION WAS LABOR INTENSIVE AND REQUIRED APPROXIMATELY 250 MAN HOURS PER ACRE TO PLANT, HARVEST, CURE, AND PACKAGE. ONCE HARVESTED, TOBACCO WAS PLACED IN SPECIAL BARNs FOR AIR CURING. THE BARNs WERE FRAMED IN FOUR-FOOT BAYS IN MULTIPLE TIERS TO SUPPORT WOODEN TOBACCO “STICKS” USED TO HANG TOBACCO PLANTS. AIR CIRCULATION WAS ENHANCED BY HINGED VENTILATION BOARDS. ONCE CURED, TOBACCO LEAVES WERE STRIPPED FROM THE STALKS, SORTED, PACKED, AND PREPARED FOR SALE.

BETWEEN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY AND 1938, ALL TOBACCO FOR DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL MARKETS WAS PACKED IN HOGSHEADS, OR BARRELS, AND SHIPPED TO WAREHOUSES IN BALTIMORE FOR SALE. IN 1939, THE FIRST LOOSE-LEAF AUCTION WAS HELD IN UPPER MARLBORO. BY 1950, NINE LOOSE-LEAF AUCTION HOUSES OPERATED IN MARYLAND’S FIVE TOBACCO-GROWING COUNTIES, AND SOLD OVER 90 PERCENT OF THE CROP. THAT YEAR, 1,372 FARMS IN PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY PRODUCED OVER 9.5 MILLION POUNDS OF TOBACCO, APPROXIMATELY 26 PER CENT OF MARYLAND’S TOTAL TOBACCO CROP.



John Collins, 1941, U.S. Farm Security Administration, Library of Congress



Photograph by A. Aubrey Bodine • Copyright © Jennifer B. Bodine • Courtesy of www.aubreybodine.com



Photograph by A. Aubrey Bodine • Copyright © Jennifer B. Bodine • Courtesy of www.aubreybodine.com

*Clockwise from upper left:
Farmers inspecting a tobacco crop; Air-curing the harvest in a tobacco barn; A tobacco market in Upper Marlboro.*



MOORE'S PLAINS TO BEECHWOOD

"I have always thought that the life story of an old place could best be told in the spring...the country in springtime, for me, means Beechwood."

EFFIE GWYNN BOWIE, *ACROSS THE YEARS*, 1947

THE BEECHWOOD PROPERTY ORIGINALLY WAS PART OF THE 400-ACRE MOORE'S PLAINS TRACT PATENTED IN 1672. BEECHWOOD HISTORICALLY OPERATED AS A TOBACCO FARM AND IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LOCALLY PROMINENT HILLEARY, GWYNN, AND BOWIE FAMILIES. HILLEARY FAMILY MEMBERS WERE BURIED IN A CEMETERY LOCATED NORTH OF BEECHWOOD. IN 2012, THE INTERRED INDIVIDUALS WERE RELOCATED TO TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN UPPER MARLBORO.

TWO HOUSES HAVE OCCUPIED THE SITE. THE FIRST WAS CONSTRUCTED IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY BY THE HILLEARY FAMILY. HARRIET CLOTILDA GWYNN (1831-1928) MOVED TO THE HOUSE IN 1855 FOLLOWING HER MARRIAGE TO THEN-OWNER GEORGE WASHINGTON HILLEARY (1803-1863). HER NIECE, EFFIE GWYNN BOWIE (MRS. RICHARD IRVING BOWIE, 1869-1950), REMEMBERED THE ORIGINAL DWELLING AS "A LARGE, RECTANGULAR, CLAPBOARD HOUSE, THREE STORIES AND A HALF, WITH AN L WING" SITED AMID FOUR ACRES OF LAWN. SHE PROPOSED THE NAME "BEECHWOOD" IN RECOGNITION OF THE TREES SURROUNDING THE HOUSE.

THE FIRST BEECHWOOD HOUSE BURNED IN 1913. HARRIET CLOTILDA AND HER SECOND HUSBAND, BENJAMIN BOWIE, BUILT THE CURRENT DWELLING ON THE ORIGINAL HOUSE SITE. THE REBUILT BEECHWOOD WAS A SQUARE, TWO-STORY BUILDING REMINISCENT OF THE EARLIER HOUSE.

EFFIE GWYNN BOWIE RETURNED TO BEECHWOOD AS A COMPANION TO HER WIDOWED AUNT IN 1923 AND INHERITED THE PROPERTY IN 1928. EFFIE GWYNN BOWIE WAS A COMMUNITY LEADER ACTIVE IN LOCAL CIVIC, SOCIAL, AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS. SHE REPRESENTED PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY ON THE DEMOCRATIC STATE CENTRAL COMMITTEE IN 1921. HER GENEALOGICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF EARLY PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY FAMILIES, *ACROSS THE YEARS*, WAS PUBLISHED IN 1947.

UPON THE DEATH OF EFFIE GWYNN BOWIE IN 1950, ANDREW GWYNN BOWIE, HER SON, INHERITED BEECHWOOD. ANDREW GWYNN BOWIE MADE IMPROVEMENTS TO THE HOUSE "TO RETAIN...THE OLD ATMOSPHERE." THE MONUMENTAL TWO-STORY PORTICO, THE SIDE PORCH, AND THE PROJECTING BAY WERE ADDED UNDER HIS DIRECTION. THE HOUSE IS NOTED FOR THE QUALITY OF ITS NEOCLASSICAL DESIGN.



Undated Photograph of Effie Gwynn Bowie from the personal collection of Mrs. Effie Gwynn Fox



Beechwood, 1934, from the personal collection of Mrs. Effie Gwynn Fox

