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# The Great Original Establishment, Prince's Linnaean Botanic Garden and Nurseries

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#### Abstract

The Prince Family Nursery was run by four generations of the Prince family. It is thought to be the first nursery in America and as time went on, it was often referred to as the "Old American Nursery". Over the years, the Prince family separately and then jointly ran the nursery as, "The Great Original Establishment" and "Prince's Linnaean Botanic Garden and Nurseries". The latter being a nod to the Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus and his system of binomial nomenclature. The Prince Family Nursery was one of the most important American sources for fruit plants and ornamental trees from around 1730 through the Civil War. In addition to supplying farmers and home gardeners, the Prince Nursery provided plant material to other nurseries as Americans moved into the middle and western parts of the continent. The Prince family members were also prolific writers on a myriad of horticultural topics, including viticulture, roses, tree fruit production, and even hard cider apples. How the Prince Nursery influenced early American horticulture will be discussed in this paper.

## **History and Patriarchal Lineage**

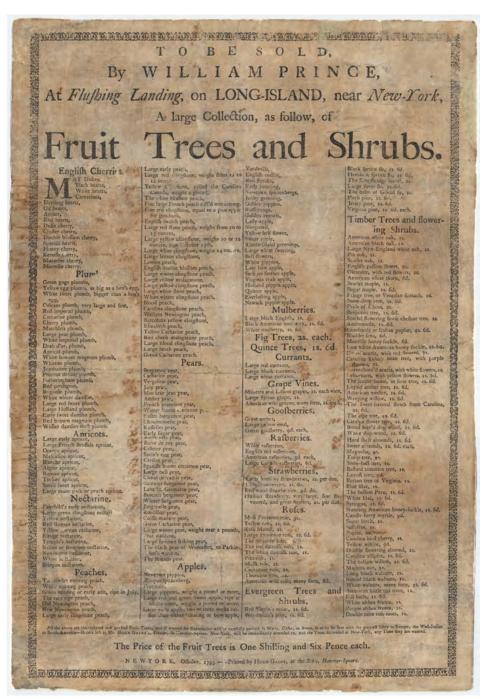
Founded in 1737, the Prince Family Nursery operated for 130 years, until about 1865. It was the first major commercial nursery in the United States and imported plants from Europe, Asia, Australia, and the American "frontier". The Prince Family Nursery also exported American plants abroad, bred fruit trees, grapes, and roses, and was a leader in perfecting nursery growing techniques. Many of the grafted apple, pear, and cherry trees that could be found in the early Northeastern orchards were produced by the Prince's nursery. They also trained, and provided nursery stock to many of the early nurserymen that went on to start their own nurseries, such as the Lueling and Meek nurseries in Oregon (Green and Green 2003).

The nursery was located on the southeast side of Flushing Bay in Queens, New York which is on the far western part of Long Island, just south of and on the opposite side of the East River from Hunts Point in the Bronx. The location was prime real estate, combining excellent soils and microclimate, and the ability to ship goods and plants by water and land. In fact, the Prince family built railroad

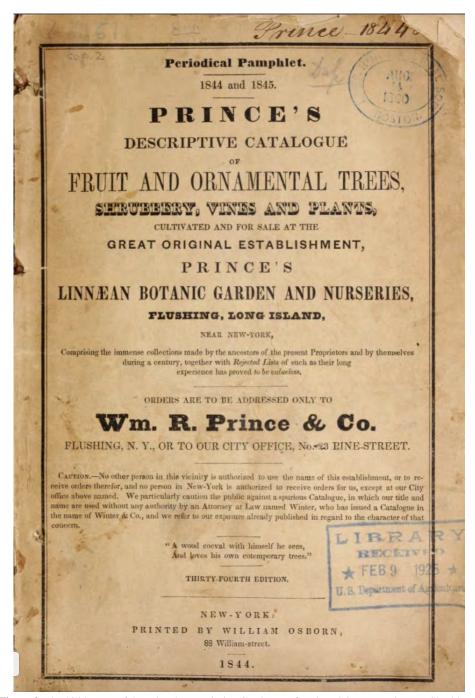
lines, docks, and a bridge over the Flushing Creek to facilitate access to their business.

The Prince family was the first nursery to advertise ornamentals plants in America. At first they used poster-style broadsides and later with expansive catalogs full of botanical details and horticultural management instructions (Figures 1 and 2). In 1771, the nursery's first broadside advertised 33 plum, 42 pear, 24 apple, and 12 nectarine cultivars. By 1827, the nursery contained more than a hundred species of Australian plants, and a year later it listed more than 600 roses.

Robert Prince (married to Mary Burgess) "founded" the Nursery in 1737. It is thought that he mostly collected plants for his own use. His son, William Prince Sr. (1725-1802) opened the Prince Family Nursery as a commercial venture in about 1765 (Woodhams 1999). (Note: William Prince and his son of the same name appeared to inconsistently use the senior and junior titles. When needed, I have added the suffixes to this manuscript to provide clarity.) The first known advertisement from the nursery appeared on 21 Sept 1767 and the first nursery catalog was published in 1771 (Jacoben and Williams 2009).



**Figure 1.** A broadside advertisement for the Prince nursery from 1793.



**Figure 2.** The 1844 cover of the Prince's Descriptive Catalogue of Fruit and Ornamental Trees, Shrubbery, Vines and Plants.

This catalog featured the transatlantic sales of apple trees to England, which must have been quite a feat that they wanted to brag about considering English apple production was very much so established at the time with their own nurseries. Plus, it would have been extremely challenging to keep even dormant trees alive during the long journey. The Prince Family Nursery was the first to commercially grow pecan (Carya illinoinensis) trees, showing an early domestication of a species with a center of origin in the Mississippi Valley, Texas, and Northern Mexico (Cornett 2004). In 1772, William Prince Sr. planted 30 pecan nuts from which he grew 10 plants (eight of these he sold in England). William Sr. is thought to be one of the first people in America to sell budded or grafted plants and to develop new varieties that were adapted to the local climate and soil.

William Prince Sr. had two sons, Benjamin and William Jr., who split up the business into two nurseries (Woodhams 1999). Benjamin Prince operated the Old American Nursery which he eventually sold to William Jr.

William Prince Jr. (1766-1842) operated the Linnaean Botanic Garden and Nursery (Woodhams 1999). Like his father, he imported foreign trees and plants, especially from Australia, as well as developed new varieties. Under William Jr.'s direction, many of the shrubs and flowers from the Lewis and Clark expeditions (1803-1806) were sent to the Prince's nursery for propagation and distribution. The nursery catalogs produced from 1815 to 1850 are ranked among the most important horticultural publications in the U.S. during that time. William Prince Jr. was also a founder of the New York Horticultural Society (1818). He used his book, A Treatise on Horticulture (1828), to synthesize many of the lessons he learned as a nurseryman, horticulturalist, and plant explorer (Prince 1828).

William Robert Prince (1795-1869) was the son of William Prince Jr. (Woodhams 1999). As a young man he went on plant-collecting expeditions in the Eastern U.S., fur-

ther expanding the Nursery's expansive list of plant species and varieties. In particular, William Robert devoted his life to grape culture and the improvement and distribution of native grapes. Like many others at the time, William Robert speculated on developing a silk industry in North America. He imported mulberries (*Morus mulicaulis*) and built a cocoonery. Unfortunately, this gamble did not pay off, resulting in the loss of his fortune and the already mortgaged Linnaean Botanic Garden and Nurseries, which ended up under the control of Gabriel Winter, William Robert's brother-in-law.

But this wasn't the end of William Robert's career. In 1849, he traveled westward and to Mexico in 1851 in pursuit of new species. Eventually, he regained control of the nursery, which he passed on to his sons, William (III) and LeBaron Bradford Prince, whose careers ultimately distanced them from the nursery business. By this time, the nursery had expanded to 113 acres (Jacoben and Williams 2009). William Robert's sons sold the nursery shortly after the Civil War ended. After attending Columbia Law School, LeBaron Bradford served in the New York State assembly and senate. He was later appointed by President Rutherford B. Hayes as a justice in the territory of New Mexico and then went on to be the Governor of New Mexico from 1889-1893. he returned to Flushing in 1920 to oversee family and professional affairs, and died there in 1922 (TimesLedger 2004). According to an article in the Queens Chronicle, "L. Bradford Prince founded the Flushing Historical Society in 1903. When its last president died in 1980 the Flushing Historical Society was discontinued, and much of the Prince nursery and estate artifacts have been lost" (Marzlock 2008). The article goes on to say, "the Prince Nurseries closed after the death of L. Bradford Prince's father, the third William Prince, in 1869. Most of the property was sold off, except for the homestead, which remained the residence of Charlotte Prince Henry, sister of the fourth William Prince, until her death in 1926."

Many unusual trees and shrubs flourished on the property and throughout Flushing well into the 20th century. In her book, *Old Time Gardens Newly Set Forth*, published in 1901, Alice Morse Earle describes the "oldest Chinese magnolias" and the "finest Cedar of Lebanon in the United States" still standing in the forlorn and forgotten garden at the Prince homestead (Earle 1901). By 1935, much of the Prince's estate property was neglected and overgrown (Marzlock 2008).

Today, the area is heavily urbanized. Citi Field, the Mets home stadium, is just a few blocks to the west from where the Prince family must have had large nursery fields and associated structures. Nonetheless, remnants of the Prince family legacy remain, including Prince Street, which is where the family home was located, and a series of streets just south of the headquarters named after plants (Walsh 2009). The Queens Botanical Garden is a few blocks south of the former Prince Family Nursery.

# Notable plant introductions

Among the most important tree and fruit introductions include, the Lombardy poplar (Populus nigra 'Italica') imported by William Prince Sr., the 'Washington' plum bred by William Prince Sr., the 'Isabella' grape cultivated by William Prince Jr., and white mulberries imported by William Robert (Woodhams 1999). The Prince family were known for large-scale production of their plants, and in 1798 they advertised 10,000 Lombardy poplars for sale, each 10-17 feet tall (Wood 1994). 'Isabella' is most likely a Vitis lubrusca × Vitis vinifera hybrid, but it is unclear where or by whom that cross was made. It is famously blamed for being the source of Grape phylloxera (Daktulosphaira vitifoliae) into Europe in the late 1800's. I did not find any records that specifically named the Prince nurseries for introducing phylloxera and their operation had been shuttered by the time phylloxera devasted French V. vinifera vineyards.

In 1790, William Prince planted the pits

of twenty-five quarts of 'Green Gage' plums, which produced trees yielding "fruits of every color". Out of them came the 'Imperial Gage', which was later taken to England under the name of 'Denniston's Superb'. Also produced were the 'Red Gage', 'Prince's Gage', and the 'Washington' plum. The plum was considered significant for its ability to be dried and kept for long periods, an important quality attribute in the era before refrigeration. In the Plums of New York, U.P. Hedrick stated, "to William Prince and William Robert Prince, ... belong the credit of having given plum-growing its greatest impetus in America" (Hedrick et al. 1911). And, while not pomological, the "Chinese Potato" (Dioscorea polysta) (more commonly called the Chinese Yam) is among the many plants brought to America by the Princes. A perennial climbing vine native to China and East Asia, its edible tubers are cultivated largely in Asia and sometimes used in alternative medicine. This species of yam is unique, in that the tubers can be eaten raw. It was proposed as a crop that could be produced in mass quantities to feed the hungry, but that seems never to have come to be.

## **Interactions with Historic Figures**

By the time of the Revolutionary War, The Prince Family Nursery was already well known to both the English and the American colonists. Unfortunately, some nursery plants were deemed valuable commodities for purposes that were not their original destiny, such as the 10,000 grafted cherry trees that had to be sold for barrel manufacturing during the war. However, the fame of and the resources within the nursery offered some security to the Prince family such as when British General Lord Howe ordered his troops to protect the Prince Garden and Nursery from military battles.

After the war, then President George Washington visited the nursery in 1789 along with future president John Adams and Continental Congress president John Jay (Jacoben and Williams 2009). Unfortunately,

Washington was disappointed and reportedly stated, "these gardens, except in the number of young fruit trees, did not answer my expectations. These shrubs were trifling and the flowers not numerous." Perhaps, this was because he visited the nursery during the winter when it would not have been as impressive.

By 1828, the Prince Nursery offered 140 different kinds of plums for sale. William Sr.'s introductions of the 'Green Gage' and other plums proved to be quite noteworthy in America. So much so that William (IV) Henry (1765–1837), duke of Clarence, a son of England's King George the Third, visited the nursery in order to thank and congratulate William Sr. on his studies of the plum (Jacoben and Williams 2009).

Thomas Jefferson, often thought of as one of America's most important early horticulturalists, though no mention of him should be done without pointing out his complicit and complicated relationship with slaves and slavery, purchased many plants from the Princes. While at the home of William Jr., Jefferson left a note requesting "all you have" of sugar maples and bush cranberries (Viburnum trilobum) as well as three balsam poplars, six Venetian "sumachs" (Cotinus obovatus), and twelve "Bursé" (Beurré Gris) pears (Cornett 2004). Later that year, Jefferson would receive sixty sugar maple trees, Prince's entire stock, which were subsequently planted "in a grove" below the Second Roundabout on the northeast slope of Monticello mountain. This became Jefferson's experiment in sugar production at Monticello. While a commercial sugar industry never took hold in Virginia, Jefferson continued to advocate for the sugar maple suggesting that every farmer should "have a sugar orchard, as well as an apple orchard".

Cornett (2004) also mentions that, Jefferson had taken a copy of Prince's catalog and obviously had studied it thoroughly, for the following month, when in Philadelphia, he wrote an enormous addendum to his original order and expanded his fruit order to include: 'Brignole' plums, apricots, Red and Yellow

Roman nectarines, 'Green Nutmeg' peaches, 'Yellow October' and 'Lemon Clingstone' peaches, and 'Spitzenburg' apples, as well as Madeira walnuts (*Juglans regia*) and filberts. 'Spitzenburg' become one of Jefferson's favorite apples (https://www.monticello.org/house-gardens/in-bloom-at-monticello/esopus-spitzenburg-apple/).

### **Books**

In addition to the descriptive catalogs, the Prince family, particularly William Jr. and William Robert, were prolific writers on a number of horticultural topics, as follows:

• 1828: William Jr. published *A Short Treatise on Horticulture* 

Intended to be a supplement to the nursery's catalogues, focused on describing several varieties of fruits, ornamental trees and shrubs

• 1830: William Jr. and William Robert published *A Treatise on the Vine* 

The first good book on viticulture in America

1831: William Robert published A Pomological Manual

Contained full and accurate descriptions of the known varieties of all hardy tree fruits, except the apple

1846: William Robert published A Manual of Roses

Considered to be the first good book printed on the rose in America

#### **Hard Cider Production**

In William Jr.'s 1828 horticultural treatise, he stated that cider apples grown in America are better than those from England or France because the climate is "warmer and dryer" allowing the apples to mature to a greater sugar content (Prince 1828). Furthermore, he recommended that ciders farmers, "should select only the choicest of both countries [sic. England and France], for "in this way he will be sure, even if some of them do not fully realize his expectations, at least no part of his collection can fall very far short of it." Indeed, this has been substantiated by my own

research program and his recommendations are not far from my own.

In William Robert's *Treatis on the Vine*, he seemingly takes a lesson from apple selection for cider production and applies it to grape cultivar selection. "Sweet and luscious grapes yield in general but inferior wines, from the same causes that apple of a similar character afford cider of the least excellence. But they are useful nevertheless for a variety of purposes. Very sweet, luscious, and high flavoured varieties are suitable for what is termed essence grapes, in order to be mixed with others less sweet and high flavoured in making wine, as they substitute the saccharine quality, and impart an artificial flavour,

which easily approximates, being so nearly allied by natural affinity." (Prince 1830). At that time in America, cider production was much more common than wine production, thus the analogy would have likely been understood by his readers. However, the opposite is probably true today, and, in fact, many cider producers are learning how to mix apples so that they afford cider the most excellence.

By 1844, the Prince Descriptive Catalog listed 25 apple cultivars for cider production (Figure 3). Among these are some well-known English selections, including 'Hagloe Crab' and 'White Styre'. American cider apple cultivars included, 'Harrison' and 'Vir-

Name.	Color.	Form.	Size.	Quality.	Season when at maturity.	Remarks.
*291 Black, or Virginia Red	st.		2	2	Autumn	V. P. An esteemed Southern va-
Streak						riety.
*292 Buck's County Salisbury			2		Dec. Feb.	V. P. A Pennsylvania variety.
*293 Campfield Newark sweeting	r. y.	oblate	2	1	Sep. Jan.	V. P. Firm, sweet and rich.
*294 Cann	p. g. r.	conical	2	1	Autumn	V. P. Much esteemed in New-Jersey.
295 Coccagee	y.	ovate	2	1	Oct.	V P. Highly esteemed.
*296 Cooper's russet	y, p,	oblong	3	1	Nov. Mar.	V. P. Used also for cooking.
297 Downton Downton Golden Pippin Knight's Golden Pippin	у.	roundish	3	2	Oct. Jan.	V. P. Good for dessert, but too diminutive.
298 Foxley	v.	oval	3	1	Sep. Oct.	V.P.
299 Golden Harvey	rus, y.	roundish	3	1		V. P. Exceedingly rich.
300 Grange	y.	roundish		2	Sep. Feb.	V. P. Good for dessert, but too diminutive.
301 Granniwinkle	d.r.	oblong	23	1	Nov.	V. P. Rich and very sweet.
302 Hagloe Crab	y. r.		3	1	Autumn	A small English variety.
*303 Harrison Harrison's Newark	у.	oblong	3	1	Nov. Ap.	V. P. One of the most esteemed.
*304 Herefordshire Red Streak English Red Streak	st. r. y.	ovate	2	2	Nov. Ap.	Firm, dry and rich, much estcemed for kitchen.
*305 House, or Grey-house	g. r.	oval	3	1	Oct. Jan.	V. P. Good also for table,
306 Poveshon	d. 7.	flat	3	1 2	Sep. Oct.	Flesh dry and sweet.
307 Red Sweeting *308 Roane's White Crab	F.	oblate	2 3	1	Autumn	V. P. Used to mix with others.
309 Siberian Bitter-Sweet	y.b.	round	3	li	Sep. Jan. Sep.	Rich and musky. V. P. Greatly esteemed.
310 ——— Harvey	y.	globular		1	Nov. Mar.	V. P. Highly esteemed.
*311 Virginia Crab	g. r. r. y.	globular		11	Oct. Mar.	
Hughes' Virginia Crab		-	18	1	1	riety.
*312 Taliaferro 313 Transparent Zurich	st. w. r.	flat	2 2	1	Sep. Oct.	V. P. Fine Southern variety.
*314 Wetherill's White Sweeting	p. y.	roundish			Sep. Uct.	V. P. A Swiss variety. V. P. A sweet variety, used also
314 Wetherm's White Sweeting	p. v.	toundish	4		3	for dessert.
315 White Styre	D. V. W.	roundish	3	11	Oct. Jan.	L. Esteemed old English variety.

Figure 3. List of cider apples in Prince's Descriptive Catalog, 1844.

ginia Crab/Hughes' Virginia Crab' which are both part of a new wave of orchard plantings supporting the current expansion of the U.S. cider sector.

# **Impacts on American horticulture**

The Princes' impact on American horticulture was extensive. They made hundreds of plant introductions from Europe, Asia, and Australia and also bred many new varieties. They produced plants for the Eastern US, especially the tree fruit orchards in New York, and provided plants to nurseries on the Western "frontier". They developed grafting techniques and trained others in nursery production. The catalogs and books that they produced and wrote were among the most important guides to horticultural techniques in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

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