

Prosper Berckmans & Sons Legacy to Southeastern Peaches and the Masters Golf Course

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Abstract

Prosper Berckmans emigrated in 1850 to New Jersey as a young man from Belgium followed by his father Louis, who at the time was recognized as a distinguished horticulturalist, pomologist and pear breeder. Prosper and his father later moved to Augusta, Georgia where they saw an opportunity to expand horticulture (pomology) in the South, which had been largely an afterthought due to the omnipresence of “King Cotton” and its economic importance among the rural agrarian population. The Berckmans established a nursery called Pearmont in 1857 and then purchased nearby orchard land (named Fruitland) and a large, unfinished house (Fruitland Manor) in 1858 to expand their newly named Fruitland Nursery business, which Prosper owned until his death in 1910. Prosper’s nursery catalog had widespread distribution, and he eventually founded the Georgia State Horticultural Society in 1876, which he served as its president until his death and also served as president of the American Pomological Society from 1887-1897. He bred many types of fruit trees and grew thousands of seedling selections as well as introduced cultivars from Europe, but he was best known for his development of commercial peach cultivars for the South including promoting many new cultivars derived from ‘Chinese Cling’ such as ‘Elberta’ and ‘Georgia Belle’. He sent the first commercial shipment of Georgia peaches to New York in 1858 and earned the titles “Father of Georgia Peach Culture” and “Father of Peach Culture in the South”. His family records show he planted more than 3 million peach trees over his lifetime. Prosper’s three sons continued with the family business and in 1912 they completed the largest peach sale at that time by shipping their entire peach crop to New Jersey. Fruitland was later sold in 1925, but in 1931 one son returned to design the landscape of the future Augusta National Golf Club course (home to the Masters) on the former nursery property. Another son served as the Club’s manager, which was housed at Fruitland Manor and today remains the Masters’ clubhouse. The two sons saved over 4,000 trees during the golf course layout, and each of the 18 holes was named for a different plant to honor the horticulture legacy that Prosper had brought to the southern U.S. more than 70 years earlier. Thus, the horticulture history of both the “Peach State” and the Masters Golf Course are intertwined just as their names are synonymous with the state of Georgia.

Introduction

Prosper Jules Alphonse Berckmans was an internationally recognized, innovative nurseryman, pomologist, and horticulture visionary during the 19th and early 20th Centuries who was born into an upper class, aristocratic family where his father Louis had earned national and horticulture fame in his native Belgium before emigrating to the United States. Prosper’s sons would also become noted horticulturalists in the family business and continue as horticulture consultants after his death (Caldwell, 2016; Myers, 2015, Okie, 2016; Range, 1952;

Reynolds, 2002). The Berckmans, but most importantly Prosper, were the promoters and marketers of horticulture and fruit growing in the rural, agrarian southern United States prior to and during the reconstruction period following the American Civil War. They also promoted new fruit and ornamental varieties (cultivars) throughout the United States and other countries with their extensive selection of plant cultivars listed in their internationally distributed catalogs. Prosper’s vision, enthusiasm, persistence and contributions to horticulture and fruit tree culture in the U.S. are noteworthy achievements that included

promoting horticulture as a viable economic alternative to traditional agronomic crops and being one of the progenitors of America's most recognized peach growing region and golf course.

Formative years in Belgium (1830-1850)

Prosper Jules Alphonse Berckmans (nicknamed P.J.) was born 1830 in Arscht, Belgium to Dr. Louis Mathieu Edouard and Marie Gaudens Berckmans. It seemed apropos that the name 'Berckmans' translates to "Men of Trees" as both father Louis and son Prosper were indirectly responsible for planting millions of trees in their lifetimes (Myers, 2015). Prosper's father Louis was a medical doctor, Belgian independence fighter, artist and a self-taught pomologist or more aptly called the "Baron of Pears" for his pear breeding avocation (Okie, 2016). The elder Berckmans had high expectations for Prosper and gave him a name to fit these expectations. Prosper's family estate in Iteghem, Belgium included many hectares of pear trees and other fruits, but he received his formal elementary education at Liers and Tournai and then at age 15 Prosper went to study at St. Germain University, France and attended meetings at the Royal Horticultural Society of France, which further stoked his interest in horticulture. In 1846 he published an illustrated book, named *Indicateur General*, of his family's estate plantings that showed his keen eye for detail and aesthetics (Okie, 2016). At age 17 he returned home and studied botany while working with eminent botanists at the Botanical Gardens in Brussels and with his father assisted famous Belgium Horticulturalist Jean Baptiste Van Mons on a 3-volume treatise on "Fruits of France and Belgium" (Range, 1952). He quickly earned respect as a knowledgeable horticulturalist in Belgium by age 20.

Journey about America (1850-51, travel notes)

Due in part to the political and economic climate after the 1848 European revolutions

and the religious convictions of the family, the Berckmans left their substantial Belgium estate and at age 20, Prosper or P.J. as he was called, with his father, step-mother and brother Emile emigrated in 1851 (Prosper arrived first in 1850) to New Jersey to begin a new life establishing a nursery and growing pears commercially. Upon arrival in September 1850, Prosper spurred on by the American dream of becoming wealthy went on an information gathering journey through the South and Midwest to find the most promising location to start a horticultural enterprise. He kept a diary of his trip and wrote detailed notes of what he saw and the people he met (Berckmans, 1850a; Reynolds, 2002). He spent time in northern Georgia where he and his father owned mineral rights and a Belgium colony had been established near Rome, Georgia. While prospecting for agricultural land, Prosper stayed at the plantation owned by General Louis Joseph Barthold LeHardy the Viscount de Beaulieu who founded the Belgian colony in 1848. Prosper found row crops growing on the plantation and nearby, apples, grapes (wine) and vegetable crops were raised by other Belgian colonists (Berckmans, 1850a; Reynolds, 2002). However, despite the Belgian presence, Prosper decided not to start a nursery here as his mineral rights were not promising and the cooler climate of the Georgia mountains and lack of transportation infrastructure were critical limitations for a successful agriculture export business (Range, 1952; Reynolds, 2002).

As Prosper scouted the eastern U.S. and visited farms and cities, his diary had astute observations of the frontier farmers, city workers, and their customs which clashed with the perceptions from his egalitarian upbringing and social circles in Belgium. During his travels in the South, Prosper found the populace to be accepting of cultural norms that he viewed as uncivilized. He especially noted the ubiquitous use of tobacco. "if you observe the incessant movement of their jaws and the quantities

of tobacco juice that they spit out ... This disgusting habit is universal ... wherever people congregate you find evidence of this beastly habit. The quantity of tobacco thus consumed by a tobacco chewer is incredible: you will see a well-dressed man in a black suit and white vest, with a diamond pin on his shirt, in short: a perfect *gentleman*; this man will be walking with a lady dressed in the latest fashion displaying great affluence –and then, suddenly, he will pull a big wad of tobacco from his pocket ... he will bite into it as if he were eating a piece of bread, and none of this will be uncouth.”(Berckmans, 1850b).

Unlike the abundance of fruits and vegetables on the dinner table that Prosper had seen in the North (New England), in the South he observed that “The normal [food] of the planters who live far from the cities ... consists of the eternal bacon, coffee, and corn bread three times a day; sometimes they have pan-fried fowl, fried eggs, simply boiled cabbage leaves, a glass of whiskey and a piece of tobacco. The latter two –tobacco and whiskey- make up the chief pleasures of the people” (Berckmans, 1850b). Embodied by his travel observations and business ambition, Prosper felt that promoting horticulture would make a positive addition to both the South’s economy and diet, which he felt culinary variety was an important attribute in a progressive society.

Pomologist, Horticulturalist, and Nurseryman

After Prosper returned from his information collecting journey, he settled in 1851 with his father Louis, step-mother, and half-brother Emile in Plainfield, New Jersey where Dr. Louis Berckmans had chosen the location to start a fruit tree nursery and plant more than 1000 varieties of pears like he had done in Belgium (Range, 1952). While living in Plainfield, Prosper became a citizen in 1854 and met his future wife, an American named Mary Craig. The Berckmans had settled close to the New York pomologists

and brothers Charles and Andrew Jackson Downing of whom Prosper assisted Charles on the revision of “The Fruits and Fruit Trees of America”, the standard for American pomologists in the 1800s (Myers, 1927; Reynolds, 2002). Unfortunately, A.J. Downing died in a steamship explosion at age 36 in 1852, but he had mentioned Dr. Louis Berckmans’ artistic skill in drawing plants prior to the 1856 revision of Charles and his (Andrew) pomology book.

A.J. Downing was considered to be one of the most esteemed landscape designers in mid-19th Century America, but he had a keen interest in fruit and had commented in his writings that there were more peaches available in New York than all of France, and American apples on the European markets sold for twice as much as at home. He encouraged all men to cultivate an orchard of fruit (Myers, 2015). Downing’s observations and sage advice as one of America’s foremost horticulturalists of his generation might have had some influence on the Berckmans’ decision to emigrate and seek opportunities to become prosperous nurserymen and horticulturalists in their newly adopted country, the United States.

Unfortunately, the colder winter weather in New Jersey eventually proved too discouraging for the Berckmans horticultural endeavors and thus in 1857, Prosper, Mary Craig, Emile and Louis, who had divorced his second wife, moved to Augusta, Georgia to restart their nursery business since the climate, soils and available transportation hubs were more advantageous for a fruit and plant export enterprise. They bought orchard land west of Augusta that ironically had been named Pearmont and even brought 20,000 pear seedlings with them to plant (Myers, 2015).

Adjacent to Pearmont was a new nursery named Fruitland established by Dennis Redmond on a 315-acre tract that already had apple, peach and other fruit orchards when he bought it in 1854 (Myers, 2015). Mr. Redmond was a well-known nurseryman and

editor of the *Southern Cultivator*, an Augusta-based periodical promoting southern agricultural reform via crop diversification as a counterbalance to the South's heavy reliance on cotton as the primary cash crop. By 1856, Mr. Redmond had planted numerous fruit crops including apples, peaches, grapes, strawberries and woody ornamental plants (Cashin, 1983). His nursery was located 3 miles from Augusta, Georgia and a mile west of the Savannah River (Reynolds, 2002) and encompassed a historical pre-1800 Indian and colonist trail that had a spring used by Native-Americans and European travelers. He would also start an architecturally unique house called the Redmond Manor, which he published the plans in detail in the *Southern Cultivator* (Redmond, 1857). He had wanted his Fruitland home to be a model "southern

country house" landscaped and planted with horticultural crops (Fig. 1) instead of the ubiquitous cotton fields and the associated plantation labor (slaves) commonly perceived by northern abolitionists at that time of representing southern agriculture (Herrington, 2012).

In 1857, having similar horticultural interests and being neighbors, Prosper and his father bought into a 50:50 partnership with Redmond and in 1858 Prosper, Mary Craig, and Louis became 100% owners and incorporated as Fruitland Nurseries of the P.J. Berckmans & Company (Roberts, 1976). The Redmond Manor house became their residence and they planted the entrance carriageway (avenue) with southern magnolias that had been grown from seed received from Athens, Georgia (Reynolds,



Fig. 1. Fruitland and Redmond Manor surrounded by a peach orchard. Published in *The Southern Cultivator*, 1857. Courtesy of Biodiversity Heritage Library. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>

2002). These magnolias still line the avenue today, which is now the entrance to the Augusta National Golf Clubhouse (formerly the Redmond Manor).

Fruitland Nurseries referred to as the Southland Horticulture Mecca

Fruitland Nurseries due largely to Prosper's drive, vision and energetic zeal

P. J. BERCKMANS CO., AUGUSTA, GA.



To Our Patrons

WITH this edition of our **General Catalog of Fruit and Ornamental Trees, Roses, etc.**, for fall of 1905 and spring of 1906, we gratefully acknowledge the liberal and increasing patronage which has been bestowed upon our firm for many years past, and we tender our sincere thanks to the numerous customers who have been kind enough to recommend us. We shall ever strive to deserve such confidence and shall at any time be glad of the opportunity of forwarding catalogs to friends of our customers upon receipt of a line requesting us to do so. We feel a legitimate pride in numbering among our regular patrons many persons whose names appeared on our order book in 1857, and who have aided us with their faithful support in building up our present extensive horticultural establishment.

THE FRUITLAND NURSERIES are located west of and adjoining the limits of the city of Augusta, on the Washington Road (continuation of Broad street) and $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the terminus of the Lake View Electric Car Line. In the home tract of 400 acres are soils of every texture found in this section of the State, thus enabling every class of products to be grown under the most favorable conditions.

We have no connection whatever with any other Nursery, all our dealings being direct with purchasers.

The Nursery Department

is divided as follows: Roses, 25 acres; Fruit Trees, 275 acres; Grape Vines, 10 acres; Evergreen and Deciduous Trees, 25 acres; Small Fruits, 15 acres; Orchard and Test Grounds, 40 acres.

The Greenhouse and Plant Department

now includes over 60,000 square feet of glass, 30,000 feet of which are devoted to palms alone. All modern improved appliances tending to economy in labor and healthy products have been added, and in addition to the plant houses, a large area of cold frames allows us to safely carry through the winter an immense stock of plants, which in our mild climate do not require artificial heat. With the numerous additions and improvements added to this department, we are prepared to offer plants at such prices as are in keeping with horticultural progress and the times.

We may, therefore, claim that our stock of **trees and plants, in point of quality, variety and perfect adaptability to the Southern climate, and to Southern fruit growers, together with healthy growth and large size**, is equal to that of any similar establishment in the United States.

OUR FOREIGN TRADE has of late years increased rapidly. We refer with pleasure to this feature of our business, as our products are sent to Australia, China, Japan, Africa, the East Indies, Brazil, Bermudas, the West Indies, and every section of Europe and North and South America.

Catalog

Catalog will be mailed free on application.

Descriptive Catalog of Fruit Trees, Grape Vines, Strawberry Plants, Evergreens, Roses, Flowering Shrubs, Palms, etc., issued in August.

P. J. BERCKMANS COMPANY,
(Incorporated.)

Telegraphic and Cable Address: **BERCKMANS, Augusta, Georgia.** **AUGUSTA, GEORGIA.**

Fig. 2a. Fruitland Nursery 1905 Catalog, pages 1, 9. Courtesy of NYBG Mertz Digital Collections. <http://mertzdigital.nybg.org/digital>

PEACHES—Continued

Directions for Cultivating the Peach.—A sandy loam is best suited to the Peach, but it will adapt itself to almost any soil, provided it is well drained. Plant one year old trees, 18 x 18 feet, cut the trees back to 15 to 24 inches, as it is always best to have a low-headed tree. In the spring, after the growth has started, remove all but three branches and let these be distributed so that the tree will be well balanced. For the first two years fertilize with well decomposed barnyard manure, or a mixture of one part of cotton seed or bone meal to two parts of acid phosphate. Apply one and one-half to two pounds to each tree. After the third year avoid nitrogenous fertilizers and use a fertilizer containing a good percentage of bone phosphate and potash. Prune every year by cutting off one-third of the previous year's growth. The head of the tree should be broad and open so as to allow free circulation of light and air. Never plant newly cleared woodlands; such lands should be cultivated for at least two years before setting the trees, otherwise woodlice will injure the peach trees. In preparing orchard land plow deep. If necessary sub-soil. Cow peas drilled in two feet apart, leaving at least four feet on each side of the trees, is the best crop to grow in a peach orchard. Cultivate frequently and in February or March turn under the cow peas. When the orchard begins to bear it should have clean cultivation. After the cow peas have been turned under all subsequent cultivation can be done with a harrow and cultivator. After the fruit is harvested drill in peas for a cover crop.

To prevent brown rot, see page 5 for directions. (Never spray when a tree is in bloom.)

FREESTONES

Alexander. Above medium; highly colored in clay soils, less so in light soils; flesh greenish white, very juicy, vinous and of good quality; adheres to the stone. Matures from May 20 to June 15 at Augusta. Trees are remarkably prolific and bear very young.

Amelia. (Stroeman's Carolina, Orangeburg, Rayzer's June, Jackson, etc.) Ye y large, conical; white, nearly covered with crimson; juicy, melting, vinous, sweet, and of high flavor. Too tender to stand long carriage, but excellent for home consumption. July 1 to 10.

BELLE. (Belle of Georgia.) Very large; skin white, with red cheek; flesh white, firm and of excellent flavor. Tree a rapid grower; very prolific; fine shipper. Ripen July 5 to 20.

BERENICE (China strain.) Large to very large; yellow, mottled with dark crimson; flesh yellow, melting, juicy and rich. End of July to middle of August. In point of excellent qualities it is superior to any yellow Peach of the season, is most showy and an excellent shipper; its good quality also commends it to the planter. It originated with the late Dr. L. E. Berckmans, in 1877, and after 25 years' trial we have nothing equal to it at the same season.

Captain Eades. Large; yellow; excellent quality. Ripens early in July.

Chair's Choice. Large, yellow; flesh very fine; heavy bearer. Ripens middle to end of August.

Champion. Large; skin creamy white, with red cheek; flesh rich and juicy. Ripens middle to last of July.

CHINESE FREE. Medium; oblong; white, with red cheek; flesh firm; fine quality. Ripens July 15th.

CARMAN. Large, creamy white, with deep bluish; skin very tough, but flesh very tender and of fine flavor, juicy; prolific bearer. A most profitable and popular shipping variety. Ripen June 25 to July 1.

Crawford's Early. Large; yellow, with red cheek; flesh yellow, juicy and rich. Ripen from 5th to 15th of July.

Columbia (Pace, Yellow Indian, Tinley, etc.) Large; dingy yellow and red stripes; flesh yellow, buttery, rich and sweet; quality best. End of July to middle of August.

Dr. Berckmans. Large; creamy white; bluish cheek; flesh white, melting, vinous, of the highest flavor. A seedling of the Chinese Cling but surpasses any varieties of the same parentage, maturing at the same season. Middle to end of July.

Early Rivers. Large to very large; pale, greenish white; flesh white; sub-acid; very vinous and juicy; of exceedingly delicate flavor; skin very thin. Maturity June 10 to 20.

EARLY TILLOTSON. Medium; white, covered with red; melting, good. Very prolific; a favorite market variety; stands shipping well. Ripen June 25 to July 1.

ELBERTA. Large; yellow, with red cheek; juicy and of good flavor; flesh yellow. Supposed to be a seedling of Chinese Cling. Ripen middle of July; an excellent shipping variety. No other peach has made such a name for shipping, and none is cultivated more extensively.

EMMA. Large; yellow, with red cheek; flesh yellow, firm, juicy; best quality. Ripen July 25 to August 5; follows Elberta. An excellent market sort in some sections.

Everbearing. Has a long continued bearing period. The first ripening begins about July 1 to 15, and successive crops are produced until the middle of September. Fruit in all stages of development—ripe and half-grown—may be seen upon the tree at the same time.

The fruit is creamy white, mottled and striped with light purple and with pink veins; oblong in shape, and tapering to the apex; flesh white, with red veins near the skin; very juicy, vinous and of excellent flavor; quality very good to best. Freestone of the Indian type.

The first ripening averages 3½ inches long by 3 inches broad. The size of the fruit of the second and following crops diminishes gradually, until that of the last ripening is about 2 inches in diameter. A supply of fruit may, therefore, be secured from the same tree for nearly three months in succession.

We do not recommend the Everbearing Peach for commercial orchards, but for family use and small gardens, where there is room for only a few trees, its value is unquestionable. We offer it with confidence, as during the past seven years we have gathered fruit from it in its various stages of development.

FLEITAS, or YELLOW ST. JOHN. (May Beauty.) Medium, roundish; orange yellow, with a deep red cheek; juicy, sweet and highly flavored; flesh yellow. Ripens end of June to July 10.

FORD'S. A large white fleshed Chinese free; good quality heavy and reliable bearer. Ripens from middle to end of June. **GREENSHROD.** Origin, North Carolina. Ripens a week later than Alexander, but much larger. Round; sometimes elongated; flesh white, very juicy, of good quality; skin white, with red cheek; highly colored in the sun, becoming a favorite and profitable early market sort.

HALEY. (Early Belle.) Ripens July 1st to 5th, or just after Tillotson, but of larger size. Highly colored; quality good. A first-class shipping variety.

MOUNTAIN ROSE. Large; white, washed with carmine, flesh tinged pink; juicy, vinous, sub-acid; very good. Ripens July 1, or immediately after Tillotson. A good early market variety for Piedmont section.

Picquet's Late. Very large; yellow, with a red cheek; flesh yellow, buttery, rich, sweet, and of the highest flavor. Maturity from end of August to middle of September.

Peen-to-Free. Fruit 2 to 2½ inches in diameter; very flat; skin pale greenish white, with a beautiful mottled red cheek; flesh fine grained; good quality. As this Peach offers a long time before maturity or full development, it is often gathered prematurely, which renders it unfit for use. It should be allowed to hang upon the tree until approaching full maturity, when it shows its excellent quality. As this Peach blooms in January, it is only adapted to Florida and subtropical sections. Matures in Florida from April 1 to May 10.

RED RIVER. An improvement on early Louise, but of larger size. Best quality; fine shipper and a most profitable market sort. June 10 to 15.

Robert. Large; creamy white, with crimson cheek, flesh white, slightly veined pink, melting, juicy and vinous; quality best. Middle of August.

Salway. Large; yellow; handsomely mottled, with brownish-red cheek; flesh deep yellow; juicy; very good; very productive. Ripens middle of August.

SLAPPY. Clear golden yellow, with dark cheek; flesh yellow and of good quality; is inclined to develop an imperfect side, although it is a popular market variety in some sections. Ripens early in July.

SNEED. (Blosser, Peebles.) Medium; creamy white, with carmine mottling; flesh greenish white; juicy; semi-cling; quality fair. Ripens on an average of 6 to 8 days before the Alexander.

Stump the World. Very large; white, with bright cheek; flesh white, juicy, and of good flavor; stands carriage well, July 20 and lasts three weeks.

THUBER. Large to very large; skin white, with light crimson mottlings; flesh very juicy, vinous and of delicate aroma; of exceedingly fine texture. Maturity middle of end of July. A seedling of Chinese Cling, which it resembles in size and beauty, but is perfectly free. This variety has seldom failed to yield a crop of fruit when other varieties failed, and is highly prized as a market sort.

Triumph. Above medium; skin orange-yellow and carmine; flesh yellow; adheres slightly to the stone like Alexander; melting, slightly sub-acid; quality good. Maturity June 10.

Victor. Ripens a few days later than Sneed; resembles Alexander; light mottled carmine, with a few faint stripes; juicy, vinous, semi-cling; quality best; of the Alexander class, but ripens before that variety.

WADDELL. Of medium size, fine shape; skin greenish white, almost covered with red; flesh white and juicy; very prolific; a fine market sort. Ripen June 25.

WONDERFUL. Very large; deep yellow, with carmine bluish; flesh yellow, firm, good. Good for late marketing.

CLINGSTONES

Albright. Large; white, changing to light orange; juicy, sweet; very good. Middle of October.

Eaton's Golden. Medium; skin golden yellow, with occasionally a few pink spots; flesh yellow, sweet, juicy, apricot flavor. Middle of September. Superior for canning.

GENERA LEE. Improved Chinese Cling. Above medium, oblong; creamy white, with carmine wash; flesh very fine grained, melting, very juicy, and of high flavor; quality best. July 1 to 10.

for horticulture expanded quickly and within four years after its establishment, Fruitland(s) listed in its catalogue more than 1300 varieties of pears, 900 of apples, 300 of grapes, and 100 each of azaleas and camellias and was considered the best collection of Southern apple, peach, and pear trees (Range, 1952). Fruitland Nurseries (often called Fruitlands by locals) offered many fruit varieties and ornamentals of which many were collected internationally (Figs. 2a, 2b). The almost unfathomable quantity of varieties offered may have been due to Prosper Berckmans belief in Jean Baptiste Van Mons “law of reversion” where a variety declines to its “wild” state over many generations of propagation and thus to maintain genetic diversity one must produce and select among offspring seedlings to maintain desired horticultural attributes (Okie, 2016). The result of the outcrossing of “old” varieties to produce new, more vigorous ones (i.e., thousands of seedlings) resulted in many seedlings becoming propagated as “new” varieties if they possessed favorable horticultural characteristics. This might help explain the prodigious number of pear trees Prosper and Louis maintained in Belgium, New Jersey, and Georgia.

Prosper became sole owner of Fruitland Nurseries in 1867 as his father retired in 1870 to a one room cabin he built on a mountain top near Rome, Georgia and was referred to as “The Hermit of Mt. Alto” until his death in 1883. Prosper’s 3 sons, Louis, Prosper Jr. and Robert later joined the business and each had different talents running the business up to shortly after Prosper’s death in 1910. The Berckmans produced one of the finest nursery catalogs in the South with upwards of 25,000 copies annually in the 1880s that were even mailed internationally (Reynolds, 2002). By 1904, Fruitland expanded to 500 acres which included 100 acres of ornamentals, 50 of roses, 20 of grapes, 20 of test orchards, 3 acres under cover, large plantings of shade, fruit, and nut trees, and 60,000 square feet under glass (Myers,

2015). The American Pomological Society called Fruitland Nurseries “the Southland Horticulture Mecca” (Range, 1952). The prestige was further enhanced by Prosper’s vast horticulture and pomological expertise that he unselfishly shared via correspondence with his peers on grafting and budding of improved fruit varieties that transformed horticultural production in the southeastern U.S. and elsewhere by replacing seedling varieties with clonal propagated ones (Range, 1952).

The frequency of Berckmans’ correspondence with fellow horticulturists was impressive and global in reach as he attended meetings of many different horticultural societies. He also visited prominent European as well as American horticulturists. Thereby, due to his networking success he knew many of the leading horticulturists and was able to exchange with them new varieties of trees, plants, and shrubs. No other nurseryman in the South was able to match Fruitland’s plant introductions during this time (Range, 1952).

Vision to promote fruit crops as alternatives to King Cotton

Pre-Civil War, the South was considered a horticultural back water as cotton (i.e., King Cotton) was such a lucrative cash crop. For example, in 1850 cotton sales were worth \$20 million in GA while all horticulture crops combined were only ~\$92,800 (Myers, 2015). After the war and during reconstruction, the southern states economies were in ruins partly due to being a largely agrarian-based society that needed abundant cheap labor (slaves) to grow crops like cotton. Though cotton remained important for the rural economy, the dynamics of lucrative northern markets and incentive-based tenant farming opened up opportunities for other crops. Prosper Berckmans had realized how underutilized fruit crops were in the South considering the very profitable seasonal niche markets available in the North. He wanted to promote fruit production to

southern plantation farmers by introducing new fruit varieties well adapted to the South as viable cash crops for export (Okie, 2016).

Since Augusta was a railroad and waterway center, Prosper knew fruits and other horticultural crops could be readily shipped to northern markets for high prices. Prosper through his Fruitland Nurseries successfully introduced apples, peaches, plums, pears, and other European cultivated fruits as well as many exotic fruits and ornamentals such as Kaki persimmon, cold-hardy lemons, kumquats, figs, roses, azaleas, camellias and Amur privet to southern gardens and orchards (Range, 1952). The American Horticulturist magazine glowed over his pomology acumen stating “He combines a knowledge of northern fruits with accurate and ready information concerning the semi-tropical fruits, probably not enjoyed by any other horticulturalist on the continent.” (Range, 1952). J.H. Hale, a prosperous “Yankee” peach grower from Connecticut turned Georgia peach mega-grower and promoter, visited Berckmans’ Fruitland and called Prosper “the leading pomologist of America and of the world” (Hale, 1890; Okie, 2016).

The Father of Georgia Peach Culture

Prosper Berckmans was widely recognized for his many horticultural advances and variety introductions but he probably was best known by his peers as the “Father of Georgia Peach Culture” or “Father of Peach Culture in the South” (Myers, 2015). Prior to 1850, seedling propagated peach trees were grown on a limited scale in Georgia and were said to only be fit for hogs or inferior brandy and therefore not thought of as a cash crop like cotton (Bonner, 1947). Seeing a market opportunity to replace feral, “fence row” peach trees that were poorly cultivated with peaches from improved varieties grown under good horticulture practices, Prosper reasoned shipping high quality peaches to northern cities before their local orchards harvested in August could

be very profitable. Several other Georgia planters knew this too but Prosper and his father had the horticulture knowledge, training, experience and resources (capital) to make it happen. They fortunately arrived in Georgia when enthusiasm for planting and exporting peaches was mounting during the 1850s after the first few boxcars of peaches sent north were bringing prices as high as 50 cents a peach and \$15 a bushel (Bonner, 1947) or \$16 and \$478, respectively in 2020 dollars. However, before Prosper and other enlightened horticulture producers became wealthy, the Civil War closed the northern markets and the destruction of infrastructure such as railroads and the post-war demand for cotton effectively pushed horticulture crops like peach back to irrelevancy until the late 1870s when the popularity of new varieties such as ‘Elberta’ began to be exported (Okie, 2016).

Despite the financial losses from the war, Fruitland survived and Prosper and his sons continued to plant peach orchards at Fruitland and also continued to develop and procure new varieties for their nursery sales. Prosper was a key horticulturalist in the improvement of the ‘Chinese Cling’ peach through his selection of ‘Thurber’, a seedling of ‘Chinese Cling’ grown by his father and was the number one variety in Georgia prior to ‘Elberta’ (Range, 1952). From ~1870 to after reconstruction (1880s), 3 of the 5 top Georgia peach varieties (‘Elberta’, ‘Belle’, ‘Thurber’) were introduced or promoted by Prosper. He also introduced the Chinese ‘Honey’ and the flat ‘Peento’ peaches through his catalog, but they did not become commercially successful during his lifetime (Myers, 2015). However, ‘Peento’ was used as a parent for developing low chill peach varieties for the deep South.

During the boom of new peach variety introductions in the late 1800s, both Prosper and Marshall Wilder were quite adamant about setting standards for naming new cultivars and often were involved in contentious discussions at the annual

American Pomological Society (APS) conference. Both men wanted cultivar names to be simple, plain and pertinent. Wilder was particularly rankled by the ostentatious names being put forth by the many amateur “breeders” as indicated by Prosper reprinting APS’s naming rules with Wilder’s comments for the 1883 Georgia State Horticultural Society Proceedings. As to new cultivar names, Wilder wanted “no more Generals, Colonels, or Captains, ... no more Presidents, Governors, ... Monarchs, Giants, ... Hog-pens, Sheep-noses, ... or Stump-the-World. Let us have no more long, unpronounceable, irrelevant, high-flown, bombastic names to our fruits” (Okie, 2016). The exhortations of both men to dispense with “pretentious, nonsensical names” eventually helped formulate rules for naming new varieties that were submitted for approval for listing by horticultural organizations such as the American Pomological and Georgia State Horticultural Societies.

Prosper’s enthusiasm for a fruit crop that could complement cotton farming and be transported to northern cities and their affluent populations was evident as the new peach introductions he advertised reached annual sales of 7,000 boxcars of peaches shipped from Georgia. In 1858, he received \$5/bushel from a shipment to New York, which in 2020 would be the equivalent of \$155/bushel, and thus reaffirmed his belief in the value of growing fruits versus cotton. His unwavering belief in the future of horticulture crops for southern planters, was exemplified by his devotion to peaches where his nursery records show that his family were responsible for planting over 3 million peach trees in his lifetime (Fruitland Augusta, 2020). Prosper was a highly sought out source for cultural information for peach growers throughout the latter half of the 19th Century and was a key figure in growing the famous Georgia peach industry though his nursery propagation of peach varieties and horticultural advice.

Regional and National Horticulture Leader

In addition to his reputation as a renowned nurseryman/pomologist with immense horticulture knowledge, Prosper Berckmans throughout his life felt duty-bound to promote the many opportunities horticulture offered to those in agriculture and to society as a whole. He was generous with his time to promote horticulture, especially fruits in his adopted homeland. Prosper felt after reconstruction when incivilities between the two sides of the Civil War had begun to subside that the South would be receptive to what he had always dreamed of doing since he emigrated and that was to “promote and encourage the science of Horticulture in all its branches” (Okie, 2016). He foresaw an opportunity to use horticulture crops as a springboard for economic prosperity for Southern agriculture in general and specifically the former wealthy Georgian planters who now faced an uncertain labor market for large plantation farming. He organized a group of Georgia farmers to form the Georgia State Horticultural Society (GSHS) in 1876 where in his inaugural speech Prosper espoused that fruit growing could be a profitable and “refining influence” on Georgia planters (Okie, 2016). His own fruit growing mantra influenced by Van Mons’ theory of genetic stagnation would usher a new wave of variety improvement and expansion of horticulture crops in Georgia and neighboring states. The proceedings of the annual GSHS meeting, which at times depended on Prosper’s generosity to be published, were a treasure trove of practical information on varieties and growing, preparing, marketing and shipping horticulture crops (Range, 1952).

Prosper was so well respected that he remained as president of GSHS until his death 34 years later (Myers, 2015). While president, he advocated (unsuccessfully) for establishment of horticultural schools/colleges throughout Georgia as he was a progressive supporter of agriculture education. He was appointed to serve as a Board Trustee for the Georgia Experiment

Station (Range, 1952) and also made time to serve as the horticulture editor for the Augusta 'Farmer and Gardener' (Reynolds, 2002). On a national level, he was elected president of the American Pomological Society from 1887-1897, serving 5 terms and was recommended in 1889 to be the first U.S. Secretary of Agriculture under Republican Benjamin Harrison but declined due to his political affiliation as a "loyal" Democrat (Myers, 2015; Range, 1952).

Prosper's lifetime encompassed more than that of a prominent horticulturalist in that today he would have been considered a 19th Century sustainable farmer, who championed integrated pest management and soil conservation. He was aghast at the loss of insectivore birds and founded and served on the Georgia Board of Entomology. Prosper supported state laws to protect insectivore birds and also promoted forest conservation and reforestation (Range, 1952) to repurpose eroding, abandoned crop land. In addition to the Georgia State Horticultural Society (1876), he founded the Richmond County Agricultural Society in 1885 and served as president of it until his death (Caldwell, 2016). He also served on the editorial board of the 'Farmer and Gardener' and president of the Cotton States Mechanical and Agricultural Fair Association during the 1870s and was a respected board member of the 1888 Augusta's National Exposition (Caldwell, 2016). Lastly, not to miss out on international exposure, Prosper provided horticultural exhibits for the 1885-1886 New Orleans Exposition and gave the opening address at the Horticultural Congress held at the 1893 Chicago's World's Fair (Caldwell, 2016) and was the only American judge at the Centennial of the Royal Agricultural Society in Ghent, Belgium his native homeland (Reynolds, 2002).

Prosper enthusiastically extended his vocational interests to serve his community. He was an avid proponent of teaching agriculture in public schools as well as planting urban gardens. He encouraged use

of Latin names with the common names of plants to avoid confusion between the public and retail horticulture businesses. He was instrumental in getting the US Census Bureau to conduct the first horticulture survey in 1890 (Range, 1952). Prosper with his impressive plant knowledge was asked to design private gardens and/or provide appropriate plants, which he did for Barnsley Gardens near Adairsville, Georgia, one of the few surviving antebellum gardens in the South (Sullivan, 1981). In addition to his nursery and consulting businesses, Prosper was civic minded and served as manager of elections in his county precinct as well as a grand juror (Caldwell, 2016). Besides his egalitarian sharing of his horticulture knowledge and time, Prosper donated money and plantings to many organizations and institutions and provided fruits and vegetables for the Confederacy as well as supported a charity for wounded soldiers during the early years of Fruitland (Caldwell, 2016).

Tributes to Prosper Berckmans' contributions to Horticulture

After Prosper Berckmans' death in 1910, his peers including Dr. T. H. McHatton of University of Georgia thought so highly of him that they paid tribute to him at the 1911 Georgia State Horticulture Society's Conference. At the meeting, it was decided to spend the time for discussion to allow members and guests to give their thoughts on Prosper as a person. Dr. McHatton opened with a moving tribute to Prosper's horticultural career ending with "this country has lost a constructor, whose work will live on into time". Colonel B.W. Hunt followed with an elegant tribute that praised Prosper for being "our chief and our inspiration, our guide and director in horticulture". Some memorable eulogy quotes about his life were: (1) "encyclopedia knowledge"; (2) "to know him was to love him and it was a pleasure to be in his presence"; (3) "the heaviest curse of life, old age of spirit was never his"; (4)

“perfect gentleman, pure in morals, high toned in all of his dealings, cultured”; (5) “greatest pomologist the South has ever seen”; (6) “His life was one of service, ... we as horticulturalists owe a greater debt”; and maybe the best character summation of Prosper was (7) “His course was not that of

the money-accumulating merchant but rather that of *altruistic scientist who preferred the good of all before any considerations.*” (Georgia State Horticultural Society, 1911; Okie, 2016). Prosper’s lifetime dedication to and sharing knowledge of horticulture successfully raised awareness of the intrinsic



Fig. 3. Prosper Berckmans seated and sons Louis, Robert, and Prosper Jr. (Allie) (l to r). Photo courtesy Augusta National/Masters Historic Imagery via Getty Images.

values of landscape plants (e.g., azalea, camellia, privet) and fruit crops (e.g., peaches) in Georgia and onto a national prominence during the late 18th and early 19th Centuries.

Berckmans' Sons and the development of the Augusta National Golf Club

Prosper Berckmans' sons: Louis, Prosper Jr (Allie) and Robert became and remained part of the Fruitland Nursery business up to and after their father's death in 1910 (Fig. 3). Allie and Robert both graduated from the University of Georgia, and older brother Louis became a designer of golf courses and gardens including the landscaping at the Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Robert continued in the path of Prosper and was a nurseryman, horticulturist (president of both GSHS and American Association of Nurserymen), botanist (rediscovered the rare yellow magnolia), landscape designer (superintendent of Macon, GA parks), and agriculture consultant (encouraged growing ramie as an alternative to cotton) (Reynolds, 2002). In addition to their nursery and fruit orchards in Georgia, all 3 Berckmans brothers were respected landscape and/or orchard consultants in the eastern U.S. Moreover, Fruitland peach sales were still important for the family business and in 1912 the sons completed the largest peach transaction in Georgia history at that time by selling their peach crop for \$75,000 to \$100,000 to a NJ broker (Augusta Chronicle, 1912).

When Prosper's wife died in 1897, he remarried near age 70 to 38-year-old Edith Purdy, a fashion magazine editor from New York where they would spend summers in Essex, NJ (Caldwell, 2016; Okie, 2016). After Prosper died in 1910 the bulk of his estate was left to his wife Edith with a lease of the nursery property provided for his sons until 1918. Since his sons had previously inherited much of the proceeds from Prosper's inheritance from the family's estate in Belgium, they were financially set (Caldwell, 2016). Subsequently, the

trade name Fruitland Nursery of the P.J. Berckmans & Company was sold in 1918 and the nursery eventually was abandoned, though the 3 sons continued to be successful in other horticulture careers and the Fruitland name was still attached to an Augusta nursery until the 1960s (Reynolds, 2002). The Fruitland property was eventually sold in 1925 to a Miami speculator who went bankrupt before he could build a winter retreat on the nursery and orchard land. The land was later purchased by a group who wanted to build an elite winter golf course and have Robert "Bobby" Jones, Jr. design the course (Cashin, 1980).

The famous golf pro, Robert "Bobby" Jones Jr. was hired in 1931 as the architect to design a world class golf course and son Louis Berckmans was brought back as a landscape advisor to oversee the incorporation of 4,000 surviving trees and shrubs into the course design. Prosper's family house (aka Fruitland Manor) was saved and remodeled to become the Augusta National Golf clubhouse. Brother Prosper Jr. (Allie) served as the Club's first general manager (Fields, 2017). Each of the 18 holes were named after a prominent plant along that hole that was remaining from the original Fruitland plantings. The Augusta National Golf Club course opened in 1932 with many of the shrubs and trees from Berckmans Fruitland Nursery property being part of the landscape (Reynolds, 2002). The Augusta National Golf Club became the host for the world-famous Masters Golf Tournament in 1934. Since Georgia brands itself as the "Peach State" and the Augusta Masters is probably the most recognized and beautifully landscaped golf course tournament in the world, Prosper Berckmans lifelong quest to burnish the agriculture image of Georgia planters (and Southern farmers) eventually came to fruition, which was apropos considering his progressive vision and tireless efforts to elevate horticulture as a respectable and viable agriculture enterprise equal to the South's famous King Cotton.

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