EPISODE DATE: 9/02/11

EPISODE NAME: Horticulture and History at the Justin Morrill Homestead

Leonard Perry//UVM Plant & Soil Science: “Hi, I’m Leonard Perry and today on Across the Fence we have a special treat from Strafford, Vermont and the Justin Morrill Homestead where Horticulture meets ...”

Howard Coffin//Vermont Historian: “… history! Hi, I’m Howard Coffin, we’re here to meet Justin Smith Morrill today and to talk about the wonderful works he did here in Strafford, the house, the gardens, but I think what he did in Washington DC was his best work, the Land Grant Colleges act the most important piece of legislation passed in the 19th century, we’re going to talk about that.”

Perry: “And you mentioned gardens Howard, a lot of people don’t realize that Justin was actually a very avid horticulturalist and gardener and actually brought plants back from all over the world to trial right here in Vermont.”

Perry VO: “Born in 1810, Justin Smith Morrill was the epitome of a self-educated self-made man. From botany to business, agriculture to architecture … Morrill believed that progress occurs when words become deeds and ideas are put into action. The gardens on the grounds of the homestead are symbolic of Morrill’s belief in the practical application of his intellectual curiosities.”

Margie Carpenter // Head Gardener, Justin Morrill Homestead: “This is considered a Victorian kitchen garden. This was something that Justin Morrill was very proud of he was an avid horticulturalist as well as a longtime VT legislator. He was very interested in trialing different plants so Justin would bring up plants from other parts of the country and other parts of the world and trial them in this garden here. A kitchen garden to a Victorian was not a place where you grew vegetables, he did that in the outer fields where he could have rough gardens this was his experimental laboratory … he trialed fruit trees and berry bushes and perennials and herbs. The mid-nineteenth century was a great time for plant exploration and Americans wanted plants from Asia and Europe and Europeans wanted plants from America so there was a lot of transfer of plant material and he was right in the middle of all of it.”
Carpenter and her all volunteer staff are also tasked with finding flowers, plants, and trees that are historically accurate, but even then exactness must often yield to practicality ... something Justin Morrill would have understood.

Carpenter: “Most of the plants that he selected are actually plants that are in the trade today. Now in some cases the climate has changed enough so that the plants that he would have had in his garden would not flourish today, and in some cases we have pests such as deer who come in and would devastate some of the shrubs and plants that he would have grown that we cannot grow. So, you can’t always be true to the original intention of the creator of the garden, but you can go for substitutes that do the same thing. When we talk about the flowers and the plants he had such a long list of herbs and perennials that we really have been able to choose what we like, what we think will fill in, will provide color at different times during the season so it’s not been a hard task. This garden, you’ll notice, is laid out with paths and blocks so were not looking for design other than blocks of plants to show that they do grow here. Here is Echinacea it’s a very popular, common plant it was not necessarily on Justin’s list, but clearly it’s something that does very well. Bee balm is also common. None of these are particularly unusual plants to the area which is what’s so wonderful. Justin Morrill was trialing plants that we can actually find and use today. Just as Morrill’s spirit of experimentation animates this garden today ... his legacy can also be found in the ongoing perennial trials that are being conducted at the Morrill homestead by the Plant and Soil Science department at the University of Vermont.

Again, a lot of the plants he may have had, but the cultivars have changed since then so again these are some of the ones that were around in the period not necessarily on his list, but I think it’s exciting to see them growing after the first winter here and to reintroduce those as well as some brand new perennials in addition to my trials up in the northern part of the state we’ll have down here too, I think, a wonderful place for these trials I’m excited you’re able to incorporate these.”

Carpenter: “We’re very excited because of course this would have been the spirit of Justin and we will continue hopefully to be one of your resources for trialing plants. We’re a fair amount colder than it is in Burlington so this will be a good test for these plants. And I’m excited that the roses have done as well as they have. They have all taken hold and all produced one, or two, or three flowers and I think that’s probably the best we can expect.

In contrast to the ‘trials’ taking place in gardens behind the house ... the gardens at the front of the house are formal and elegant ... very much a product of their time even if ‘out-of-place’ in a rural landscape.

Carpenter: “... this is considered the pleasure ground and as you can see the strolling gravel paths the arabesque highly colorful flower beds, this had to have been an anomaly in this small rural town because most of the surrounding houses were country farmhouses with very cleared land and a Victorian pleasure ground had a lot of trees and plants. And it was highly planted, very dark, conifers, pointed spires to really mimic the gables of the house. Lots of vines very vertical planting going up the sides of the house and along the porch or veranda to the south. So Victorians just like to jazz it up with plants as much as they possibly could and certainly this part of the landscape was filled with plants and in particular plants that were particularly admired by Justin.
Perry: “And I know there is one in particular that you pointed out to me Copus Magnolia that dates back to him.”

Carpenter: “He grew it from seed. It was given to him by the country of Japan. And from that tree we have propagated a smaller one and it’s growing beautifully because it’s all by itself, there’s nothing crowding it and the copus magnolia has a wonderful star shaped white flower. It blooms in the spring it’s very fragrant and then it produces a fairly large berry in the fall so it’s a wonderful tree.

Perry: Well, you’ve done a wonderful job with the restoration here and good luck with your on-going efforts we look forward to working with you and thanks so much for a few minutes today to show us around.

Margie: My pleasure Leonard.

Perry: Now, let’s join up with Howard and a local resident.

Howard.: Thank you Leonard. Justin Smith Morrill is practically a living presence here at the historic site in Stratford. Here is the house he built the garden he tended the books he read. It's remarkable indeed.

Justin Smith Morrill did you grow up here in Stratford?

Justin.: I did I grew up in this town in fact I was born in this town in a house down by the river very close to the general store.

Howard.: You go to school that you have a formal education?

Justin.: Yes. I went to elementary school here in Stratford. My high school education was limited to 1 semester in Randolph and one semester at Thetford academy. And that was the total sum of my secondary education I did not go to college.

Howard.: Sea route into the world early. What did you do to make a living?

Justin.: I worked in a general store. In fact I work in a store right here in Stratford. Jedediah Harris who eventually became my mentor and good friend. I worked in his store for number of years and learned of the trade. Working in general store which is the center of a community you learned politics because General Stores are not just a place where you go to buy your goods but it's a center of community activity. People come to talk with their neighbors and to discuss politics. To argue politics. So was a natural training ground for myself.

Howard.: You expand your business. You make some money.

Justin.: Yes in fact I retired at age 35 a successful businessman and I was going to retire here in this house but the call of the people and politics and tension that was going on in the country at this time I felt it was my duty to run for the house of representatives and I ran as a wig.

Howard.: And apparently that people liked you and you were elected
Justin.: Yes.

Howard.: And elected again.

Justin.: I was elected for number of years and after the Civil War I went on to become a senator and was the longest standing U.S. senator in the history of the United States.

Howard.: Of all the years. Of all those years in Washington what was the thing you did that you like the most? Why did you do it?

Justin.: By far writing the legislation for land-grant college act. I had not gone to college myself but I saw this country was growing leaps and bounds and we needed educated students. But educated in the area of engineering science agriculture. Because that we needed universities to teach our young and teach the new generation.

Howard.: Thank you senator Morrill for your time today and now if you wouldn't mind I'd very much like to go into your house and visit your favorite room the library. Thank you.

Howard.: I'm sitting here in Justin Smith Morrill's favorite room in his Strafford house. Here we are looking at one of his favorite books a book on horticulture. Rather appropriate sense the theme here today is history meets horticulture. This book is filled with Morrill's handwritten notes and in the upper right hand corner I see Justin Morrill's signature. Justin Smith Morrill in the 1850s introduced a land-grant college act. The idea was to provide each college public college with 30,000 acres for each congressional district. This is land in the west and that land could be sold or used to produce revenue to support the colleges. He introduced it in the 1850s and ran into solid opposition from senators and congressmen in the south in the final blow was dealt in 1859 when President James Buchanan vetoed it. But soon the Civil War came and southern representatives and senators left in when south and suddenly Morrill had a majority in the senate that supported his bill. It passed in 1862. Morrill said in the bill this bill proposes to establish at least one college in every state up on a short and perpetual foundation accessible to all but a specially to the sons of toil were all the practical associations of life shall be taught. The sons of toil he was interested in educating the working man. The summer of 1862 was perhaps the darkest summer of the entire Civil War. The union was losing the war. General McCullans Peninsula campaign had just broken at the gates of Richmond. Robert E lee turned away. Lincoln was desperate. The war was being lost and he called up 800,000 more troops in July and June of 1862. On the 2nd of July 1862 he signed into law the land-grant college act. A year and a day later he would give the Gettysburg address calling on America it's now become what the declaration of independence said it should be equal opportunity for all. Morrill a year earlier had just assured an equal education opportunity for many many more and the effect would be on millions of Americans down the years. Justin Morrill was a strong supporter of the Civil War. Of preserving the union and of human freedom for slaves. He strongly supported Lincoln war effort and he was a major player in the financing of the Civil War. After the Civil War Justin Morrill was key to the passage of the 14th amendment. Bringing the war to conclusion making certain that all those freed slaves four million of them would be guaranteed United States citizenship.
The Morrill homestead in Stratford is open on Saturdays and Sundays from Memorial Day to Columbus Day. The homestead staff recommends you call or check the web sites for any scheduling updates you can call 802 748-4288 or check the web site on your screen WWW.Morrill homestead.org.

Across the fence is brought to you as a public service by the University of Vermont and WCAX TV.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. University of Vermont Extension, Burlington, Vermont. University of Vermont Extension, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating, offer education and employment to everyone without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status.