“I have lately bought me a Plantation”:
A Brief History of Farming and Land Use at Sweet Briar

Whitley Gallery
Sweet Briar Museum
March 2013-April 2014
Acknowledgements

The rural campus of Sweet Briar College measures over 3,000 acres—most still pasture and woodland—that encompass two lakes and a mountain. It has been acknowledged as one of the most beautiful college campuses in the nation and the tenet “A Landscape for Learning” is a pillar of the school’s current strategic plan. The lovely campus and College vision of today are potent reminders of Sweet Briar’s long life as a working farm and its inhabitants’ keen awareness of the native environment. It is poignantly apparent from her letters and diaries that Daisy Williams, the girl in whose memory the school was established, loved this place. Those who came after her have too: a nature sanctuary was established here as early as 1936 and Sweet Briar has been and continues to be the home base of a number of noted biologists and environmental scientists. Current students regularly fan across campus to tag butterflies, count salamanders, measure the weather, and monitor fragile wetlands. This exhibition touches briefly on some of this complex story, demonstrating via documents, maps, and artifacts some of the highlights of this historic landscape.

This exhibition had its beginnings in an internship undertaken by Sweet Briar College history major Sarah O’Brien ’13 in June 2012. She assisted in moving, cataloging, cleaning, and storing over 300 farm tools and artifacts such as horseshoes, milk bottles, and antique fly traps which comprised the “farm tool museum” accumulated by Sweet Briar Museum director Ann Marshall Whitley ’47 in the 1980s and 1990s. This wide-ranging collection had for many years been displayed in the rustic cabin—thought to have been a slave cabin—behind Sweet Briar House. An in-depth study and reinterpretation of the cabin as an historic structure necessitated the removal of the “farm tool museum” to storage and this move allowed for a comprehensive inventory in early summer 2012. Ms. O’Brien’s study of this material transitioned to an Arts Management practicum in the fall semester of 2012 devoted to preparations for the current exhibition.

Ann Marshall Whitley’s indefatigable efforts to collect and preserve remnants of Sweet Briar’s agricultural history deserve special mention, as without her hard work today’s students and professors might have few tangible reminders of the generations of farm workers who toiled here or of the orchards and dairy that fed campus residents for decades.

For their advice and research assistance, and for their willingness to lend documents and artifacts to the exhibition, thanks are due to Rebecca Ambers, associate professor, Environmental Studies; Keith Adams, adjunct instructor of archaeology and co-director of the Archaeological Materials Laboratory, Anthropology Department; Mike Hayslett, naturalist-in-residence, Biology Department; Lynn Rainville, director, Tusculum Institute; and Lisa Johnston, associate director, Cochran Library. Thanks are due too to the College’s photographer, Meridith De Avila Khan, for her assistance documenting artifacts. The staff notes with particular appreciation the helpful information about dairy operations provided by Cynthia and Roy Massie of Amherst. During the summer of 2012 Bill Morris of Amherst also provided welcome help during cataloging of the “farm tool museum” artifacts. Nancy McDearmon, registrar and all-around collection manager and exhibition preparator, deserves recognition for her thoughtful and careful installation of a wide variety of objects and documents. Her commentary and suggestions on the artifacts and documents to include have been invaluable. She was ably supported by student assistant Ashley Rust ’13.

It has been a challenge and a pleasure to assemble this exhibition and to write the introduction and checklist notes that accompany it. Any errors or omissions are mine.

Karol Lawson
Director, Sweet Briar College Art Collection and Galleries and the Sweet Briar Museum

Sweet Briar Museum Whitley Gallery March 2013-April 2014
Introduction

Sweet Briar 1830-1860

“I have lately bought me a Plantation which Maria talks of settling and spending her summers at. You may perhaps remember it. It lies this side of Amherst Court House, about 12 miles from here [Lynchburg], with a large brick house on it, containing about 1000 acres of pretty good land. It cost about $7000.”

Elijah Fletcher to Calvin Fletcher [his brother], 29 March 1831

With this brief comment schoolteacher-turned-businessman-turned-gentleman farmer Elijah Fletcher signaled his acquisition of the Amherst County estate that decades later would become the campus of Sweet Briar College. The original house was built in the late 18th century by Joseph Crews and was known as Locust Ridge. Elijah Fletcher purchased it from relatives of his wife. The 1830 sale notice for the land reads: “It is fertile in its quality, lies well, is well adapted to the produce of tobacco, corn, wheat etc. and is in every respect a most valuable plantation…[it includes a] barn with wheat threshing machine…and is under good fencing.”

Called “Sweetbrier” for the abundance of wild roses on the property, the estate became the summer home for the Fletchers and their four children, Sidney, Lucien, Indiana, and Elizabeth. In 1841 the family made it their permanent residence, and in 1851-1852 the original T-shaped farmhouse was enlarged with the addition of Italianate towers. Following Elijah Fletcher’s death in 1858, his daughter Indiana inherited Sweetbrier, eventually renaming it “Sweet Briar.” In 1865, Indiana married a New York clergyman, James Henry Williams, and though the couple split their time between New York City (where they owned and managed real estate) and Sweet Briar, they considered this to be their home. Indiana and James Henry raised their only child, Maria Georgiana (“Daisy”), here and taught her to love her rural retreat.

Despite his early career teaching school, as a young married man Elijah demonstrated a genuine talent for managing and improving his in-laws’ property at Tusculum, located at the village of New...

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2 Advertisement in The Lynchburg Virginian, 20 December 1830.

3 Elijah devised upon Indiana and her sister “…my sweetbrier [sic] Plantation and tracts adjoining” in his 1852 will. See Amherst County, VA, Book of Wills, vol. 14, entry 527. Also see The Letters of Elijah Fletcher, p. 273 n. 2. Elizabeth took possession of the parcel that is now the home of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, where she and her husband built a villa called Mt. St. Angelo.
Glasgow just north of Amherst Court House. He eventually bought Tusculum from his in-laws in the 1830s and began acquiring additional farmland in the area.

After he established himself in Lynchburg, Elijah became the publisher of *The Lynchburg Virginian* newspaper (1825-1841) and thereafter used it as a platform for advocating agricultural improvements. He and his partner, Richard H. Toler, advised readers at the outset that, “we shall occupy a portion of our columns with Agricultural essays of a practical nature, derived from the best sources of information that may be within our reach.” A general review of the newspaper’s issues from the spring of 1831 reveals articles, excerpts, and letters of remarkable scope and variety: the importance of pruning; how to best manage timber; bee keeping; planning kitchen gardens; improving fencing; controlling weevils and lice; cultivating hemp; raising poultry, sheep and dairy cows; feeding livestock on carrots; growing pumpkins; experimenting with new types of grass; and using leaves as manure (e.g. compost). The newspaper sampled such publications as *The American Farmer*, *The New York Farmer*, and *The Genesee Farmer*.

A scholar faced with running a plantation might well be expected to turn to literature and science as guides to profitable farming and to look askance at those neighbors who did not. It is interesting to note that the day before Elijah wrote to his brother, as quoted above, to announce his purchase of Sweet Briar, *The Lynchburg Virginian* published a front page essay titled “The Fortune of the Agriculturist,” signed with the simple pseudonym “Amherst.” It is tempting to think that Elijah may have been the author. The short piece emphasizes the crucial need for the landowner to keep himself informed and involved, “Amherst” noting that:

“…as practiced in this section of country, agriculture is not only a simple but a foolish business; but to profit by it the agriculturist must not only be a man of sense and industry but he must understand something of the operations of nature.”

In addition to the comprehensive reading he must have done to select pieces for his newspaper, Elijah also held a personal subscription to Edmund Ruffin’s influential Virginia periodical, *The Farmers’ Register*. In

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4 The editorial, which appeared 21 January 1825, is transcribed in *The Letters of Elijah Fletcher*, p. 285.

5 Summary based on a survey of *The Lynchburg Virginian* on microfilm, held at Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, VA.

6 Alternatively, the author may have been an acquaintance. For example, on 28 October 1830 *The Lynchburg Virginian* published an essay on cultivating hemp written by a David Garland on behalf of “The Amherst Triune Society.” Elijah would have been very well acquainted with David S. Garland, a wealthy landowner and prominent civic leader in Amherst County. See *The Letters of Elijah Fletcher*, p. 34 n. 4.


8 Five volumes of *The Farmers’ Register*, several inscribed “E. Fletcher,” are held in the rare book collection of Cochran Library. While Ruffin’s infamous political views are disturbing to modern sensibilities, his writings on agriculture are nevertheless recognized as important. See Edmund Ruffin, *Nature’s Management: Writings on Landscape and Reform, 1822-1859*, ed. Jack Temple Kirby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000).
1835 the journal published a letter to the editor from “An Amherst Farmer.” The anonymous author expressed a similar sentiment:

“I am sorry you have so few subscribers from this section [Amherst County], lying under the mountain [sic], to contribute to fill its valuable columns. The desire to improve is confined to a few, and they [are] pretty much scattered through the county—and unless a different spirit should pervade the cultivators of the soil, the west must still continue to be the final home for many of them.”

Again, though conclusive evidence is lacking, it is tempting to imagine that Elijah was the correspondent. One can certainly surmise that he sympathized with the author’s viewpoint. As early as 1811, well before he had started buying land in Virginia, he had noted to his father:

“The plantations in this country, as I have before told you, are large & expensive. They cultivate a great deal without ever manuring it which renders it soon poor & barren. On their fresh land they cultivate tobacco. It requires the strongest and best land to raise this weed & it soon destroys the land….Many begin to raise clover for the improvement of the land—cut one crop & let the next grow and rest on the land. It is an excellent plan and the only way to redeem their desolate fields and make them fertile. It is impossible to manure so great a quantity of land as they cultivate & it consequently soon becomes barren. If the land was more equally distributed and each man would, like the New England farmer, cultivate a little and cultivate it well, this would be a far happier & better country.”

Though the opinions of his Amherst neighbors on Elijah’s agricultural endeavors are unknown, decades later, he would be lionized in a national publication for his agricultural acumen:

“He introduced deep plowing, drained the wet land, leveled the gullies and ravines which the washing rains had been so long forming and deepening in a soil which was destitute of sod or vegetable matter to keep it together, and to sow clover and plaster [lime?]. This process acted like a charm upon these lands, and they immediately began to repay the labor and outlay by giving bountiful and remunerating crops. Mr. F. did not stop at this, but as soon as he got his farm in a situation to support stock, he began to import the best improved breeds of cattle, sheep and hogs, paying no attention to the fine blooded race-horse, which had been the only animal of cost and care in the country. His early efforts in agricultural pursuits were looked upon by many as the visionary theory of a book farmer, but the practical results were so striking that all who saw were convinced, and one after another of his neighbors began to follow his example, and a general spirit of improvement was infused which has produced favorable changes in this part of the country.”

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9 Letter to the editor, *The Farmers' Register* vol. 3, no. 2 (June 1835), p. 104. Here “the west” refers to the migration of Virginians to places such as Kentucky in search of land that had not been exhausted. Indeed, Elijah’s in-laws did just that in the 1830s. See *The Letters of Elijah Fletcher*, pp. 163, 165, 173, 173 n. 2.

10 Elijah Fletcher, New Glasgow, VA, to Jesse Fletcher, Ludlow, VT, 29 November 1811. See *The Letters of Elijah Fletcher*, pp. 44-45. My thanks to Associate Professor Rebecca Ambers for sharing her digest of agricultural references in the collected letters.

His abiding affection for rural life was so genuine that Elijah’s daughter referred to it when reflecting on his death. Writing to her uncle Calvin Fletcher about Elijah’s demise, Indiana noted that she was glad he was able to spend his last days at Sweet Briar since, even when weakened by illness, “he was so anxious to be once more at this loved spot,” and she reflected that, “this lovely home, these fields and groves so loved and cared for by him” would long be bittersweet reminders of her father.¹²

Indiana and her sister Elizabeth inherited Sweet Briar jointly and it is clear from Elijah’s will that their father wanted them to keep the property unified and to manage it together: “I give to my daughters Indiana and Elizabeth my sweetbrier [sic] Plantation and tracts adjoining… I likewise give them the [live]stock and Plantation utensils on the sweetbrier[sic] Plantation… desiring that the same be kept together and managed by them jointly for twenty years.”¹³ This, however, was not to be. In anticipation of her upcoming marriage, on 30 September 1859 Elizabeth deeded her half of the estate to her fiancé, William H. Mosby.¹⁴ Extant letters from an uncle advising Indiana to sever all legal and financial ties with her sister at this juncture suggest that Mosby’s control of the land was cause for serious alarm.¹⁵ Within a few months Indiana bought much of the property back from Elizabeth and her husband for $2,535.13.¹⁶ The deed of the transaction, dated 6 January 1860 and notarized 10 January 1860, reads in part:

“…Indiana Fletcher shall have and hereafter hold in severally separate and divided from the part or portion of the said William H. Mosby and wife for her (the said Indiana) part and portion of the said land thirteen hundred and ½ acres the same being the northern portion of the large tract called and known as the Sweetbrier [sic] place and separated from the balance of the tract by a new dividing line…. ”¹⁷

¹² The Letters of Elijah Fletcher, pp. 271, 272.
¹³ See Amherst County, VA, Book of Wills, vol. 14, entry 527.
¹⁶ The approximate equivalent is $72,200 in 2012 dollars. See www.measuringworth.com.
¹⁷ See Amherst County, VA, Book of Deeds, vol. EE, p. 339-344. Elizabeth took possession of the parcel that is now the home of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, where she and her husband built a villa they called Mt. St. Angelo. Indiana continued to divide other parcels of property from Elijah’s will into the spring of 1860. See Robert Tinsley, Amherst Court House, to Indiana Fletcher [unidentified location], 10 April 1860, Cochran Library Archives.
Oddly, the same day as this deed was drawn up, Sweet Briar was advertised for sale in the Lynchburg newspaper. Whatever the reason for announcing the property’s availability—perhaps this public notice was essential to the process of dividing the property or perhaps one of the parties involved sought some advantage in the exchange—the advertisement gives a glimpse of the estate less than two years after Elijah’s death:

“…[the plantation is] heavily timbered, newly enclosed, and well watered and in a high state of cultivation. The soil is of very superior quality and highly productive…The extensive orchards abounds [sic] in fruits of the most choice varieties, and of every description. This Estate lies in the Piedmont region, and commands a view of beautiful and picturesque mountain scenery; and is unsurpassed for healthfulness of location.”

Thus, Indiana—a 31-year-old single woman—emerged as sole owner of the Sweet Briar plantation, estranged from her sister but still very close to her brother Sidney, who would advise and assist her on agricultural matters for decades. An Amherst attorney writing to Indiana at this time noted that his wife “…was gratified to learn that you expect to return to Virginia and hopes that the birds and the flowers will delight you as in by gone days.”

Far from having the leisure to enjoy Sweet Briar’s beauty, a year later Indiana would face the challenge of keeping her father’s legacy productive and intact during the Civil War.

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18 Advertisement in *The Lynchburg Daily Virginian*, 6 January 1860. A 1992 biography of Indiana by Ann Marshall Whitley delicately suggests that she sought to sell Sweet Briar because her father’s death and sister’s marriage had left her alone, bereft, and adrift. The legal documents cited here indicate, quite to the contrary, that she acted with clear determination to preserve her father’s plantation.

19 Robert Tinsley, Amherst Court House, to Indiana Fletcher [unidentified location], 10 April 1860, Cochran Library Archives.
Property map courtesy of Associate Professor Rebecca Ambers.
Guide to the Exhibition

First large covered case on the left as visitors enter the Whitley Gallery
(documents listed left to right):

Selection of books belonging to the Fletcher-Williams family
Courtesy of Cochran Library, Rare Book Collection
- Andrew Jackson Downing, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (New York, 1855)
- William Kennick, *The New American Orchardist* (Boston, 1835)
- D. J. Browne, *The American Poultry Yard* (New York, 1856)

Selection of documents belonging to the Fletcher-Williams family
Courtesy of Cochran Library, Rare Book Collection
- Survey of Elijah Fletcher’s tract of land on “Buffaloe Ridge” and the south branch of the Buffalo River, 1844
  While the land delineated in this document was not and is not contiguous to the Sweet Briar property (it lies a bit to the northeast of campus), this hand-drawn surveyor’s map shows the way in which holdings were marked out and measured in the 19th century. Note the surveyor’s use of large trees and other natural landmarks, as well as degrees of latitude and longitude, to record the parcel.
- Letter from Elijah Fletcher to his children (Sidney, Indiana, and Elizabeth) travelling in Europe, 21 August 1846
  Writing to his children as they finished their education by touring the great cities of Europe, Elijah kept them up-to-date on the weather, rainfall, and plowing at “Sweetbrier” and he anticipated that, “You would be much pleased with the fruit in our orchard. There are all varieties and old Mr [sic] Richardson did justice in the Selection. It would be a great amusement for Inda [Indiana] and Bettie [Elizabeth] to go from tree to tree and try the new fruit.” Note in this case, the book *The New American Orchardist.*
  Elijah wrote further in this letter, “…our rural establishment we will make and adorn as becomes simple rural establishments. It is an interesting place to me and I have no wandering notions and never shall be induced to leave it.” The following year, on 9 May 1847, Elijah wrote to his brother Calvin that his daughters were content at “Sweetbrier” and were “…fond of rambling about and riding with me among the mountains.”
- Tax receipt from the 43rd Collection District of the State of Virginia, Confederate States of America, to Indiana Fletcher, 27 March 1864
  This receipt is for the dollar value of in-kind taxes paid in 1864 by “Miss I. Fletcher” under section 11 of “An act to lay taxes for the common defense and carry of the government of the Confederate States.” It details the tax assessor’s valuation of what Sweet Briar provided in lieu of cash: 200 bushels of wheat, 1,000 bushels of corn, 130 bushels of oats, 6,000 pounds of cured hay, 6,000 pounds of cured fodder, and 30 pounds of wool. Though the immediate vicinity of Sweet Briar saw no outright action (the closest engagements were at the Tye River and Lynchburg), in managing the property during the war

20 This and subsequent citations from Elijah Fletcher’s letters are taken from Von Briesen, ed., *The Letters of Elijah Fletcher.*
years Indiana—an unmarried woman—would have had to contend with obstacles such as the interruption of supply lines, inflation, and an uncertain labor force.

- Letter from Sidney Fletcher to Indiana Fletcher Williams, 1 November 1899
  Written from Tusculum, the estate north of Amherst that Indiana’s brother Sidney had owned and managed since early adulthood, this letter reports on agricultural activities Sweet Briar. One of several such letters in the College’s archives, it testifies to Sweet Briar’s continued importance as a productive farm and documents Sidney’s oversight of the property and its laborers on behalf of his widowed sister, who spent part of the year managing her real estate holdings in New York City. In this letter Sidney commented on the corn harvest, livestock sent out to pasture, recent wet weather, and plans to clear a field of pine trees to prepare it for crops. He mentioned two workers—“Bob” and “Jack”.

- Sales receipt from The John Saul Nursery, Washington, D.C. to Mrs. E. F. Mosby, 11 March 1890
  This receipt documents a varied group of decorative plants purchased for the Mt. St. Angelo estate (current home of the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts) by Elizabeth Fletcher Mosby, Indiana’s sister. Elizabeth and Indiana had both attended excellent schools as girls and both had been sent to Europe in the 1840s to polish their education. When they returned from their travels the young women had a hand in designing the additions to Sweet Briar House—a remodeling that turned the farm house into an Italianate villa. They may have had a hand in planning the gardens. Note in this case, the book *Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, an influential text in its day. The young Elizabeth’s extant correspondence to her parents in the College’s archives is filled with notes about plants and flowers and the Sweet Briar Museum holdings include a fragile collection of Alpine flowers that Elizabeth collected, pressed, and labeled while travelling abroad as a teenager. Her plantings at Mt. St. Angelo were legendary: over 70 varieties of trees and shrubs there survived well into the 20th century.

- Letter from Daisy Williams to Indiana Fletcher Williams, 4 May 1883
  Writing from Sweet Briar to her mother in New York City, the teenaged Daisy reports that “Ed” has weeded the flower garden and trimmed the rose bushes and that she and her companion, Martha Penn Taylor, had planted peas, tomatoes, and lettuce. While Daisy was a pampered child and was educated to be a genteel young lady, it is clear from her letters and diaries that she also reveled in nature while at Sweet Briar. She rode her pony, Bounce, across the property daily, fished, fed chickens, planted vegetables and flowers, and took regular notice of the weather. Note in this case, *The Child’s Book of Nature*.

Covered case in the middle of the gallery:

- Daisy Williams’s journal, open to 5 and 6 May 1880
  Courtesy of Cochran Library, Rare Book Collection
  This is one of two known diaries. Here, the 12-year-old Daisy recounts her activities at Sweet Briar and records admiring the flower garden, fishing with a friend, riding across pastures and a mountain, and

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observing the weather. In her 1882 diary (not on view) she kept a detailed list of the family’s riding horses by name and included a list of “fowls” in January 1882—enumerating 33 pullets and nine turkeys among the poultry flock. Daisy’s interest in poultry matched her aunt Elizabeth’s at the same age. Elijah Fletcher wrote to his brother Calvin, 13 March 1842, that the 11-year-old Elizabeth “is always delighted with rural scenes, with her chickens and Ducks...She has a Henhouse at each plantation [i.e. Tusculum and Sweet Briar], managed by some faithful Servant who makes a due return of Eggs and chickens that affords her quite a smart Revenue.”

- Daisy Williams’s sketchbook, open to 10 December 1882
  Sweet Briar Museum collection
A well educated young lady like Daisy Williams would have had regular art and music lessons. This 1882 sketchbook, which is filled with pages of pencil drawings of flowers, is evidence of her dutiful practice. This page shows a strawberry plant.

- Woven wool blanket, ca.1880s
  Sweet Briar Museum collection
This blanket is thought to have been used for Daisy’s pony, Bounce. Her diaries and letters are filled with references to riding Bounce across the Sweet Briar fields.

On the wall:

- Framed selection of business receipts documents belonging to the Fletcher-Williams family
  Sweet Briar Museum collection
This selection of receipts from businesses in Amherst and Lynchburg demonstrates the variety of Sweet Briar’s agricultural products. For example, there are receipts for wool, corn, and chickens. One, for a purchase of salt, is made out to Logan Anderson, Indiana’s long-time plantation overseer.23

- Framed letter from Gibbs and Hancock Wholesale Grocers, Lynchburg, to Mrs. E. F. Mosby, 28 May 1890
  This letter from a Lynchburg business to Indiana’s sister, Elizabeth Fletcher Mosby, who lived across the road at Mt. St. Angelo, outlines their prices for buying wool from her.

Covered case, corner of left wall:

- Receipt from J. E. Camden, Amherst, Virginia, to J. Henry Williams, July 1883
  Sweet Briar Museum collection
This receipt, for “furnishing and laying 35 feet of terra cotta pipe,” is made out to Indiana’s husband, James Henry Williams. The pipe, also called “tile,” was used to drain excess water from farm fields.24

- Section of a hexagonal clay drainage pipe, 1800s
  Courtesy of the Archaeological Materials Laboratory, Anthropology Department

23 Per Lynn Rainville, Anderson is recorded in the 1880 U. S. Census as black but may have been African American and Monacan (Native American). Rainville’s research on the African American community at Sweet Briar has revealed that he likely lived in the former slave cabin behind Sweet Briar House.

Hundred-year-old clay tiles—such as this example—are found embedded in the ground by College faculty and students working on surveys and experiments in various campus pastures. This example is thought to have been found in the fields down slope from the current museum building and between Sweet Briar House and the lakes—an area of campus known to have been tilled and planted with crops well into the 20th century.²⁵

Nineteenth-century drainage tile *in situ*. Photo courtesy of Mike Hayslett.

*Copy of Henry Flagg French, Farm Drainage: The Principles, Processes, and Effects of Draining Land (New York, 1865)*

Courtesy of Cochran Library, Rare Book Collection
This book, an influential text in its day, is from the Fletcher-Williams family library now housed at the College’s Cochran Library. That they owned a copy indicates that Indiana and her husband at Sweet Briar, her sister and brother-in-law at neighboring Mt. St. Angelo, and her brother at nearby Tusculum were keeping up-to-date with the latest land management practices.²⁶

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²⁵ Observations on the drainage tiles found on campus courtesy of Mike Hayslett.
²⁶ At the time this book was published, French was president of the Massachusetts Agricultural College, now the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.
Covered case, back wall:

- Holstein cattle pedigree registry book, Sweet Briar Dairy, ca. 1918-1919
- Selection of early neck tags for the Sweet Briar herd of registered Holsteins, ca. 1920s-1950s
- Photograph from an early “view book” of Sweet Briar College, ca. 1910s-1920s

Sweet Briar Museum collection

The College’s first board of directors advertised the school’s natural resources along with its buildings: “A large and fertile farm, well stocked with cattle and in charge of an experienced superintendent, a kitchen garden, orchards, a cold storage and creamery, ice-house and steam laundry, will render the institute independent and self-supporting.” Similarly, the College’s earliest printed catalogue touts the campus’s wholesome offerings for prospective students and their parents: “In connection with the school a farm is maintained which supplies fruits and vegetables; and a dairy furnishes rich milk, cream and other dairy products.”

Along the back wall:

- Framed map of the Sweet Briar College campus, 1928

Sweet Briar Museum collection

This map delineates woodland, open fields, and orchards a few decades after the school opened. The campus was still very much an agricultural operation. The College’s earliest farm manager was Ross Martindale, who came to Sweet Briar in 1908. He was succeeded by W.C. Blackwell and, in the mid 1930s, by J.E. Dinwiddie. Martindale supervised the dairy, orchards, crop and timber lands, and livestock

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27 Sweet Briar Institute (1904), p. 11.
(hogs and sheep), and also oversaw the equestrian program.29 The College’s first horse barn was built under Blackwell’s supervision and was constructed of lumber “cut on Sweet Briar property and prepared at Sweet Briar’s own saw mill.”30

Aerial view of campus in 1923, from Martha von Briesen, *Sweet Briar College: Seven Decades, 1907-1971*. There is an orchard in the upper left and there are tilled fields close to most buildings.

  Sweet Briar Museum Collection
  This report was prepared for the College’s board of directors by Jan Osinga, who managed the dairy for over 30 years. Despite the impressive scope of the farm operation, over a span of 70 years it had yielded a net loss of almost a quarter of a million dollars.

- Dorothy Carnine Scott (1903-1993), *Cow Hill, Sweet Briar*, 1937, oil on canvas, 29 x 24 inches

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29 Stephen Harding, Indian Fletcher’s plantation manager (and, as noted in her will, “my friend”), was her executor and was named in her will as one of three original trustees of the Sweet Briar Institute. The will is available in a printed pamphlet in Cochran Library Archives. See *The Story of Sweet Briar College*, pp. 44-45, 56-57; Randy Harlow, “The Good Ole Days at Sweet Brair [sic] Farm: Memories of William Lamb,” *Amherst County Magazine* vol. 1, no. 2 (December 1978-January 1979), p. 11-15.
30 Harlow, p. 12.
Gift of Eugenie M. Morenus, Professor of Mathematics and Latin 1909-1946
Sweet Briar College Art Collection and Galleries ACG.1973.055.a

The artist’s husband, Ewing C. Scott, was a Professor of Chemistry at Sweet Briar 1927-1944. She did not begin painting in earnest until her family settled at Sweet Briar, studying with Elizabeth Hunt Barrett, a professional painter who was a close neighbor of the campus. While in Virginia, Scott exhibited with the Lynchburg Art Club as well as farther afield. Indeed, *Cow Hill* was shown in Washington, DC, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art biennial exhibition of contemporary painting in the mid 1930s. This view is noteworthy in that it captures a treeless campus hillside pockmarked by “wallows”—severely eroded depressions—caused by the livestock.¹¹

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President Anne Gary Pannell in the school’s apple orchard with farm manager Joseph Gilchrist, ca. 1950.

- Apple crate, ca. 1950s
  Sweet Briar Museum collection

It is clear from Elijah Fletcher’s letters that he planted and maintained an apple orchard at Sweet Briar. Likewise, the College planted trees and harvested fruit for several decades. There were several locations, notably along the road to Monument Hill and in the sloping fields between Sweet Briar House and the lake. Three hundred apple trees were planted in anticipation of the school’s needs in

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¹¹ The observation of erosion courtesy of Associate Professor Rebecca Ambers.
1903; 1,200 were planted in 1906, the year the College welcomed its first students. In 1928 the school’s treasurer reported that the orchards produced 2,100 bushels, but while three quarters of these were sold through brokers (the rest were consumed on campus) this was considered underperforming in financial terms.\(^{12}\) In an issue of the 1952 alumnae magazine, farm manager Joseph Gilchrist explained that the College had decided to remove most of the trees and return the land to use for crops and pasture. He cited the fact the College had realized a profit from the orchard in only three of the preceding 10 years.\(^{13}\)

**On the wall to the right:**

- Framed certificates for “The Virginia 100 Bushel Corn Club,” from the Virginia Extension Service, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, to Sweet Briar College, 1949, 1952, 1955
  Sweet Briar Museum collection
  These certificates recognize the College’s admirable success in yielding at least 100 bushels of grain per acre. An article published in the alumnas magazine in 1950 reports that at this time the College maintained a dairy herd of 60 registered Holstein cows and two bulls, raised beef cattle (Aberdeen Angus), and ran 120 hogs (Landrace). In the early 1950s the fields were planted in alfalfa, clover (Ladino), wheat, barley, and corn, with 300 acres in active cultivation and 300 in pasture, orchard, and woodland. At the time, the Sweet Briar dairy sold $1,500 worth of milk to Lynchburg each month and was the top producing dairy in the immediate area. Twenty-five men ran the farm and dairy operation.\(^{14}\)

- Painted metal sign for The Sweet Briar Dairy, advertising the Holstein herd, ca. 1950s-1980s
  Sweet Briar Museum collection

- Framed U.S. Geological Service map of the Sweet Briar College campus, 1963
  Sweet Briar Museum collection
  The map bears handwritten notations (see the key in the right side margin) marking out “natural areas” (presumably tracts left uncultivated) on campus as well as the dairy-use pastures and “timber farm.” The College has maintained uncultivated natural areas throughout its history. For example, the Carry Nature Sanctuary, established in 1936 by the parents of Peggy Carry Durland ’35, was meant to provide an outdoor laboratory for students of biology and ornithology and was intended to encourage the study of conservation. In announcing the gift, the College noted, “The interest of Daisy’s mother, Mrs. [Indiana Fletcher] Williams, in conservation, has left Sweet Briar a rich heritage in the largest track of primeval forest in the state of Virginia.”\(^{35}\) Indeed, at the school’s very inception, trustees had noted in a promotional booklet that “At least six hundred acres will be set apart for parks, lawns and recreation grounds. On all sides, within easy reach, are virgin forests of oak, hickory, poplar and pines, affording opportunity for pleasant retired walks and for the undisturbed study of nature.”\(^{36}\)

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\(^{35}\) “A Wild-Life Sanctuary—Gift of Mr. and Mrs. J. C. Carry of Chicago,” *Alumnae News Sweet Briar College* vol. 6, no. 2 (December 1936), p. 15-16. Indiana stipulated in her will that, “No part of the said Sweet Briar Plantation and the two tracts of land adjoining…shall at any time be sold or alienated by the corporation….”

\(^{36}\) *Sweet Briar Institute* (1904), p. 12.
In cases and on the floor along the right side wall:

- Report of the farm committee to the board of overseers, Sweet Briar College, 18 October 1949
  Sweet Briar Museum Collection
  Business discussed in this memo includes the horse stables, dairy, hogs, and beef cattle. Notable are the mention of a major power line, to be erected by Appalachian Electric Power Company, which was scheduled to cross a corner of the College property and a scheme to cure and market Sweet Briar hams as a profit-making business.

- Minutes of the farm committee, Sweet Briar College, 26 April 1963
  Sweet Briar Museum Collection
  Notable in this document are the mention of dairyman Jan Osinga’s new endeavor to make and market Dutch-style yoghurt at the Sweet Briar dairy and the discussion of clearing dead and aged trees from the “primeval forest” near campus buildings.

- Ten gallon milk can, Sweet Briar Dairy, ca. 1950s-1990s
  Sweet Briar Museum Collection

In the glass case, top to bottom shelves:

- Selection of milk and cream bottles from the Sweet Briar dairy and from the Mt. St. Angelo dairy (privately owned), ca. 1950s-1990s
- Selection of memorabilia from the Sweet Briar dairy under the management of Jan Osinga, including yoghurt containers, individual cow ID tags from the herd, the 1994 “dairy dispersal” auction catalogue, and a t-shirt and doll commemorating the dairy’s closure
- Eight quart milk can, Sweet Briar dairy, ca. 1950s-1990s
- Small milk can for a campus household, Sweet Briar dairy, ca. 1980s-1990s
  Sweet Briar Museum collection

College administrators and trustees made the bittersweet decision to close the dairy, the last vestige of Sweet Briar’s history as an active agricultural operation, in 1994. The decision was fundamentally necessitated by rising costs related to environmental protection laws.17

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A Brief Survey of Farming and Land Use at Sweet Briar

Suggested Reading

Daisy Williams: A Memorial Published by Sweet Briar College. Sweet Briar, VA: Sweet Briar College, 1934.


Sweet Briar dairy eight quart milk can