

EARLY HISTORY OF CAMELLIAS IN THE MOBILE AREA

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THE following account is a history of Mobile's early camellias from the first known introduction to this area until Federal Quarantine 37 became effective, restricting the free importation of plants from foreign countries. History is supposed to be "the knowledge of facts and events, a true story, as distinguished from a legend or romance." There are few historical records and still fewer people now living in the Mobile area able to supply documented records of camellia sales prior to 1900, with such data as names of varieties, dates of sales, cost of plants and information as to their origin.

Most of the data on local florists and nurserymen were secured from the city directories of Mobile, dating from 1839 to 1915, old files of Mobile daily papers and cemetery records as to birth and death dates of individual florist-nurserymen. Personal contacts were made with the sons, daughters and grandchildren of these early florists and nurserymen but, strange as it may seem, they were able to supply only a few facts on the subject of camellias sold by their forebears.

My best clues to early camellia plantings in Mobile were secured between 1925 and 1929, when this writer made a systematic search for all camellias grown within a sixty-mile radius of Mobile and by advertising in Gulf Coast states, offering to buy camellia cuttings. My primary interest was to locate "new" varieties to propagate. A Model-A Ford was worn out in my efforts to find camellias in remote sections of this area.

Nearly every person contacted, owning one or more camellias, usually was able to suggest some neighbor or friend in the vicinity who also owned "a rare variety, unlike any other camellia they had ever seen." Most of these camellias, like the so-called rare varieties of today, happened to be a sort the informer did not own and usually a variety frequently found in other gardens.

In search for camellia plants during the blooming season, a camera was carried in my car and on-the-spot photographs were made of individual flowers that appeared to be new varieties. A sketch was made of the yard, showing the relative location of each plant; a description of the variety, blooming date and name, if known, were recorded.

On returning home with sample blooms, flower petals were laboriously counted to the last minute petal, requiring, in many instances, the use of a jeweler's loupe and small tweezers. Drawings were made, showing the exact size and shape of principal petals; color values, with markings, were compared with a color chart and this information was recorded. Many owners of these camellias, then sixty to ninety years old, volunteered information as to when and where they had obtained their plants. In some instances these data were noted on my charts of their yards.

By 1930 more than one hundred apparently distinct varieties of camellias had been located in the Mobile area. Among the camellias propagated and grown until they flowered, a number of duplicates developed that were at first thought to be new varieties. There is nothing so certain as the uncertainty or variation in camellia flowers from year to year on some varieties. All of this adds to the interest and anticipation of each flowering season, awaiting new mysteries of sports and color variations. This is a lesson all camellia fanciers should learn early in acquiring the camellia hobby.

Before revealing the history of early florists and nurserymen who sold camellias in this area, it is interesting to note that two Alabama State Nursery Inspectors reported ten to twelve million camellia plants are now growing in the 120 or more nurseries in Mobile and Baldwin counties. The Mobile Chamber of Commerce claims the present camellia industry brings a multimillion dollar income to local nurseries. It is doubtful if there is any other place in the world where as many camellias are propagated, grown and sold. In the operation of my small nursery, not selling plants in Alabama, mail orders have been received and shipped to such far away places as China, Australia, Hawaii, Alaska, Canada, Bermuda, England and forty states in this country, since 1925. Opportunities to fill orders in Mexico, Chile, Brazil and elsewhere in South America were neglected, due to government red tape.

Prior to writing this brief but none too complete history of early camellias in Mobile, the author visited sixteen florist-nursery loca-

tions, looking for evidence of old camellias growing on properties formerly occupied by the trade.

MOBILE'S FIRST LISTED FLORIST

Since 1925 this writer has listened to many local, fabulous, mythical stories of camellia plants, said to be one hundred or more years old, growing in and near Mobile. The earliest documented evidence of camellias brought to Mobile was found at the Mobile customhouse. An original invoice, dated December 18, 1838, listed thirty double camellias of five sorts, from Jas. & Chas. Walley, Liverpool, England, shipped on board the "Minerva" Marshall to A. B. (Abraham Bartlett) Homer, Mobile, Alabama (see Fig. 31). This invoice establishes the first verified proof of initial shipment of camellias and azaleas to Mobile.

The 1856 Mobile directory lists Wm. Homer (son of A. B. Homer) as florist and gardener, with headquarters in Stall 18, Vegetable Market, and a home address the same as his father's, three miles west on Springhill Shell Road. This is the first listing in Mobile directories of a florist. There are no other records of either A. B. Homer or his son, Wm. Homer, dealing in camellias, and no evidence now remains of original camellia plants at the old home site where their home was destroyed by fire a number of years ago.

A. B. Homer was listed as Inspector, Mobile customhouse, in the 1842 directory. A granddaughter of A. B. Homer, Mrs. C. L. Hutchinson, and a great-grandson, C. L. Hutchinson, Jr., now live on part of the A. B. Homer property or property adjoining and directly north of it. It could not be learned how long Wm. Homer operated as a florist, but it is doubtful if there was a profitable market for floricultural products during and shortly after the Civil War which left this part of the country in dire financial straits. The 1861 directory lists Homer & Blunt, with place of business and residence the same as in 1856. The 1866 directory records W. Homer as dairy operator and located one-half mile west of his former residence. As late as 1885, W. Homer was listed as market gardener and shipper at the address of 1866 records.

LANGDON NURSERIES

The first nursery, and certainly the largest, operating in this area during the nineteenth century, was established in 1853 by C. C. Langdon. It was located twenty-seven miles north of Mobile at

Langdon Station, and a sales office was maintained in Mobile. First known as Vinland Nursery, a few years later the name was changed to Langdon Nurseries and operated under Mr. Langdon's direction until his death on June 8, 1889. Mr. Langdon was born August 5, 1805, at Southington, Connecticut, and came to Mobile in 1834, engaging in the brokerage business and politics. The 1842 Mobile directory lists him as Editor of the *Advertiser & Chronicle*. For a number of years he was senior editor of two daily papers. He served as Mayor of Mobile from 1849 to 1855, and he represented Mobile in the legislatures of 1855-56 and 1862, and in the session of 1881. He was also a member of the constitutional convention in 1865 and 1875, and was the successful candidate for governor in 1872 and again in 1878. He was Alabama's Secretary of State from 1885 to 1888.

Mr. Langdon was intensely interested in horticulture as well as scientific agriculture. For several years he served on the Board of Trustees of Alabama's Agricultural & Mechanical College, now the Alabama Polytechnic Institute. His plantation, known as Langdon Nurseries, was one of the show places in Mobile County.

Agricultural journals of the 1850's were enthusiastic about Mr. Langdon's fruit experiments. The writer has in his possession two diaries for the years 1869 and 1874 which record daily activities, weather reports and things of general interest and happenings at the nursery. For example, an entry on November 18, 1869: "Mack and men taking up and housing tender plants"; November 26, 1869: "Packing trees until midnight. . . . Filled large number of orders"; and on December 21, 1869: "Pushing things with all our might, filling orders."

The year in which Langdon Nurseries started growing or selling camellias is not known. Their 1890-91 illustrated catalogue of sixty-four pages lists and briefly describes thirty-nine named varieties of camellias, with the further notation "and many others." Prices: "Strong blooming plants, bushy, \$6.50 each, in tubs. . . ." Mobile city directories list J. M. Rulifson, son-in-law of Mr. Langdon, as proprietor of this nursery from 1888 to and including 1897. The 1898 and 1899 directories list James P. Rulifson as proprietor. This man, it may be assumed, was either the son or brother of J. M. Rulifson. Neither of these two names are listed in later copies of Mobile directories, nor is Langdon Nurseries listed.

This writer made two trips to Langdon Nurseries in June, 1925, buying from the widow of Mr. J. M. Rulifson about 20,000 camellia cuttings for propagation at Longview Nursery. At that time there were many large specimen stock plant camellias, appearing to be more than fifty years old, judging from the size of their trunks and height. Prior to my visit, I had learned that Mrs. Rulifson had been selling these specimen camellias and azaleas to Mobilians. The original home of Mr. Langdon was destroyed by fire shortly after my visit in 1925, and Mrs. Rulifson moved to Mobile.

Sam Houston Lackland, founder of Mobile's famous Azalea Trail and prominent civic leader of this city, bought the 100-acre Langdon property in the Fall of 1925, reselling it to an adjoining neighbor, Franz Schneider, in 1944. On July 11, 1951, this writer revisited the Langdon property and saw a number of large camellias in the thicket of heavy undergrowth. As far as records reveal, this was Mobile County's largest and most successful old nursery, growing endless varieties of fruit, bulbs, vines, tender ornamental greenhouse plants, broadleaf evergreens, conifers, azaleas and camellias, shipping these plants to many states and foreign countries in the nineteenth century. It established a record of forty-six years' existence at least, and there is no doubt that many camellias were sold in and around Mobile, as well as nearby communities, prior to 1900.

BAY SIDE NURSERY

In the 1869 Mobile directory the above nursery was listed, with Robert Adams and James Caldwell named as proprietors. It was located at the southwest corner of Bay Shell Road and Parham Street. Little information has been unearthed other than that gleaned from city directories. It is possible that the nursery was started prior to 1869 and listed in the directory a year later. In 1870, Adams & Harris were the proprietors while James Caldwell, proprietor of Gulf City Nursery on Government Street, on the south side and east of Ann Street, was Mobile representative of Bay Side Nursery.

Daniel Harris was proprietor of Bay Side Nursery in 1872, and was followed by Wm. Maupay as proprietor in 1876. Bay Side Nursery is listed in the directories of successive years, including 1880, but with no mention made as to its ownership or management. For the period of 1880 to 1894, this nursery is not listed and neither does the name of Wm. Maupay appear in the directories.

Since the nursery was beyond the city limits, the listings may have been discontinued.

From 1895 to 1898 Henry P. Loding of Denmark, who studied horticulture in his native country and served an apprenticeship at Kew Gardens, near London, was proprietor of Bay Side Nursery. In 1899 Mr. Loding worked for C. Ravier, florist-nurseryman of Mobile. The following year Mr. Loding established the Little Gem Florist firm at 910 Palmetto Street, later building greenhouses at 166 Houston Street where he continued in business until his death, January, 1942. Mr. Loding, primarily a florist-grower, also operated a small nursery, importing azaleas and camellias, prior to the promulgation of Quarantine 37. What became of Bay Side Nursery after 1898—no one seems to know. This writer visited the nursery site several times, as early as 1925, and saw a number of specimen camellias, as well as other ornamentals, on the property. A visit to the same property last year showed no evidence of a nursery having been operated on the premises.

GULF CITY NURSERY

James Caldwell, first partner with Robert Adams in Bay Side Nursery in 1869, set up a Mobile agency for Bay Side Nursery at his residence on Government Street. The 1871 Mobile city directory carried a display advertisement, page 278: "Fruit, ornamental, evergreen trees, greenhouse and bedding plants. Catalogues sent on application." In 1880 this nursery was moved about one-half mile west on Government Street, opposite Catherine Street, operating as James Caldwell, Florist, with a retail store at 57 Dauphin Street, Mobile. The last listing was in 1899, and it is assumed that he was not in business after that date. The two locations show no evidence of former nurseries or greenhouses. Some of Mobile's finest homes have been built on these sites in the past forty years.

JOHN SEED

John Seed, Florist, was first listed in 1870 as located next to the new (Magnolia) cemetery, on the east side of Ann Street, between Texas and Virginia streets. There is evidence that he and his successors sold camellias, since there was quite a collection of old camellias on his property in 1925 and until the property was sold to the City of Mobile for use as a playground for children. Directly adjoining his property on the east, where the first burials

were made in Magnolia Cemetery, there can be found old specimen camellias of the same varieties as those grown in his nursery.

In 1875, Thos. S. Seed, Florist, succeeded John Seed and continued in business as a florist until 1895 when Miss Kate E. Seed is named as proprietor. The 1908 and 1909 directories list Mrs. Kate E. Seed, widow of John Seed, as florist and operator of the nursery. This business was in operation thirty-nine or forty years.

CLAUDEUS M. RAVIER

Claudeus M. Ravier was born at St. Christophe en Brionals Sanoe et Loire, France, on May 26, 1836, and died on January 9, 1903. Mr. Ravier immigrated to New Orleans as a young man, working there for several years and came to Mobile shortly after the Civil War. Here he engaged in landscape gardening and maintenance of cemetery lots until 1875 when he established his florist-nursery business at Selma and George streets, a short distance from the north entrance to Magnolia Cemetery. This business has continued at the same location for the past seventy-seven years under the names of C. Ravier and, more recently, C. Ravier & Sons. Mrs. Edna A. Ravier, daughter-in-law of C. Ravier, is the proprietor.

Mr. Ravier served his apprenticeship with Andre Leroy at Angers, France, a firm established in 1780. A copy of Leroy's 1865 catalogue of 156 pages, published in French and German, lists 225 named varieties of camellias with short descriptions. A copy of this catalogue is in this writer's library. Pot-grown camellias were imported from Leroy's nursery as early as 1874, according to a property owner living near the Ravier establishment. This resident has stated that her parents purchased an Alba Plena and a Fimbriata from Mr. Ravier who planted them that year. She was able to recall the date as her parents told her the camellias were planted a year before her birth which was in 1875. These camellias are still in healthy condition.

A systematic survey by this writer was made in 1925 of homes within a radius of one-half to three-quarters of a mile of the Ravier establishment and resulted in finding numerous old specimen camellias which were purchased from the elder Ravier, according to statements made by the owners. Undoubtedly, quite a few specimen camellias now in Magnolia Cemetery also originated from the same source.

CHAS. J. B. DELAGE

The inscription on a monument in Magnolia Cemetery reveals that Chas. J. B. Delage was born on December 22, 1811, in Paris, France, and died on October 28, 1886. Unsubstantiated legends of local origin might lead Mobilians to believe that Mr. Delage imported the first camellias to this city. A careful search of Mobile city directories from 1839 to 1875 variously list him as a groceryman, restaurant operator, clerk and merchant during these years, with his residence at the northeast corner of Government and Lafayette streets. Mr. Delage was first listed as a florist in the 1876 directory, operating at the address of his residence.

Mrs. Mary H. Delage, wife of Chas J. B. Delage, was listed as florist in the 1885 directory. In 1890 a retail store was listed as Floral Headquarters, on the east side of Royal and north of Conti. In 1900 the firm was listed as Jackson & Delage, Florists, located at the Delage residence. It is apparent that this business ceased to operate, since no further listings were found in later directories.

In talking to C. J. B. Delage, Jr., now in his eighty-first year, he was unable to recall details of the florist business. During a brief talk with the elder daughter of Mr. Delage, Sr., and her son, a Mr. Culver, it was learned that camellias were grown on their property and that they had two greenhouses, and sold and shipped camellia blooms. This writer recalls several old camellias growing on the northwest corner of their property during the past quarter of a century, but never observed the flowers on these plants. Within recent years *fine homes have been built on this land and no evidence remains of the past business.*

MRS. M. T. GREEN

Margaret T. Green established a retail florist shop at her residence on the east side of Lafayette, south of Springhill Avenue, in 1879 and operated it continuously until 1909. On the south side of the home, growing in the yard, are the remains of a number of old camellias, suffering from malnutrition and general neglect. These plants were probably grown to supply cut flowers in season. A quarter of a century ago, in the immediate neighborhood, there were quite a few camellias growing on the older homesteads.

MARGARET E. GOODBRAD

Mobile's second oldest florist shop, still in operation, was started by Margaret E. Goodbrad in 1882 or 1883. This business, operated

at the same location, Dauphin Street, east of Lafayette, is now under the management of her daughter, Mrs. Marston.

For a number of years they had one greenhouse devoted to growing camellias for cut flowers. Mrs. Marston does not recall whether or not her mother sold camellia plants. However, the fact that most of the large camellia plants were found within a few blocks of all the florist-nurserymen, mentioned in this report, would seem to justify the belief that all of them sold camellia plants.

BROTHERS INDUSTRIAL GARDENS

Operated by a Catholic institution, caring for boys, this organization was apparently started in 1885. They had one greenhouse, a large plot of ground, raised nursery stock, flowering plants and vegetables. Their location was on Lafayette Street, north of Dauphin, around the corner from Goodbrad Floral Company.

A Mrs. Henry Stoutz of Mobile, whose husband had an interest in Langdon Nurseries in the Gay Nineties, told me in 1932 of her husband buying from this garden a potted camellia as a gift for a friend. This particular plant later proved to be the variety now erroneously sold in the trade as Victor Emmanuel. It was given the temporary name of Blood of China¹ by this writer in 1938, until the correct name can be ascertained. The greenhouse has recently been torn down, and the nursery abandoned, apparently to make room for extensive new home and school construction now in progress.

GRIFFING BROTHERS NURSERIES

The Griffing brothers, operating two extensive nurseries in Florida and a large nursery twenty-seven miles south of Mobile, sold pot-grown camellias in the Mobile area between 1912 and 1918. At this latter date, they established their Alabama nursery at Beaumont, Texas, due to the federal citrus quarantine in Mobile County.

This writer bought a collection of container-grown ornamentals, including camellias, from their Mobile sales yard, which were all delivered and planted at Longview by their landscape man on July 5, 1915. These plants, heavily branched specimens and apparently six or seven years old, were typical of top grade camellias imported from Europe prior to 1913. Whether or not they were imported is not known.

¹ An article discussing this variety and its nomenclature in detail is scheduled for publication in the April *American Camellia Quarterly*.—Eds.