



The Story of Hiram Craig Gardner (1863 – 1951)

by

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Amesbury Carriage Museum

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The Story of Hiram Craig Gardner (1863 – 1951) Horticulturalist and Grower of Amesbury’s “Southern Plantation”

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In the 1940’s an unusual garden blossomed on Elizabeth Street in Amesbury, MA. Fruits and vegetables of all types thrived here, some rarely, if ever, seen growing in New England. All thanks to the skill of resident Hiram Gardner who named his garden the “Southern Plantation.” Hiram grew coffee beans, oranges, giant beets, African violets, sugar cane, and white tomatoes just to name a few. People came from all over to see Hiram’s amazing garden. He had a way with plants.

Hiram Gardner was born a slave on a plantation in Bristol, Virginia on April 9th, 1863.¹ His parents were James and Charlotte Gardner.² Tragically, while just a baby, Hiram was sold with his mother for \$900. At the end of the Civil War, they gained their freedom and were reunited with some of their family. By 1880, the family made their home in Virginia.³

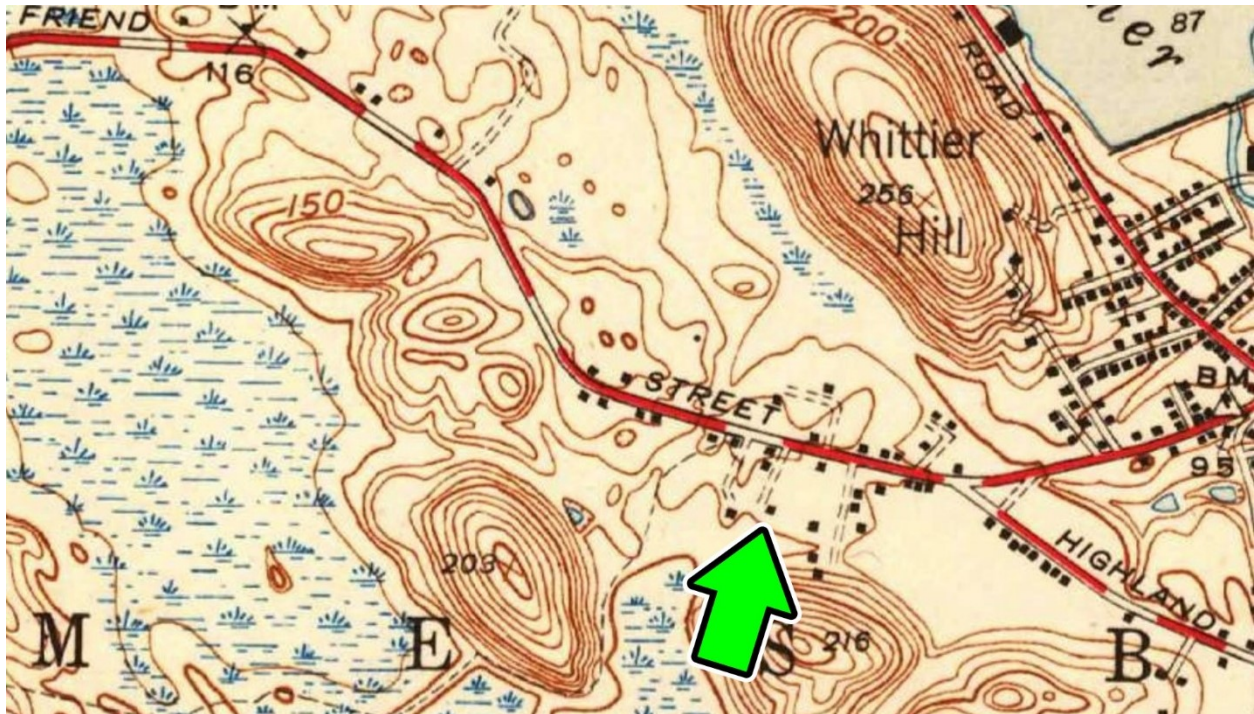
During his early years, Hiram worked on plantations and farms developing his knowledge about plants. Exactly how he came to New England is not known. One story is that he escaped a mean master by stowing away on a ship. He was discovered but through the kindness of the captain was allowed to stay. The captain even assisted in getting Hiram work once docked in Boston.⁴ Another story is that his father James came to Amesbury, found work at a soap factory and obtained housing on Water Street, and then sent money for the family to join him. This story seems the most likely as a James Gardner of Amesbury is listed in the 1886 city directory as a soap maker.⁵ Many newspaper articles mention Hiram’s travels across the country, from California to Canada before settling in Amesbury. These stories seem to have originated with Hiram giving reporters different stories of his life. Which leads one to believe he must have been quite a character with a great imagination and a gift of storytelling.

What is known is that Hiram came to Amesbury as a young man about 1882 and lived here for 5 or 6 years. He ran a paint store on Main Street and then moved to the Merrimack, N.H., area around 1890. Census records and business directories indicate that he lived in the area for about 40 years. He was married and divorced three times and had at least 12 children.



Portrait of Hiram Gardner from the *Boston Globe*, July 23, 1943.

In 1938 he bought land on Elizabeth St. in Amesbury. By 1939 he had a well-established garden on this land and was living in a small one and a half story house.⁶ In 1940, he purchased another lot next door giving him about 10,000 square feet of land.⁷ He began marketing his unusual fruits and veggies such as the white tomato, all white cucumbers, banana-pineapples and winter melons. He also grew flowers such as the serpent plant, sensitive plant and weather-plant.⁸



Arrow points to likely location of Hiram Gardner's house on Elizabeth Street (off Lions Mouth Road) in 1944 as shown on a U. S. Geological Survey topographic map from that year. (Today's Lions Mouth Road is labeled "Friend Street" on this map.)

He experimented with growing coffee beans with great success. Hiram boldly suggested Amesbury farmers could grow enough coffee to support itself and that the U.S. "...Could Produce All The Coffee Which It Requires."⁹ The possibility of not having to import coffee would benefit the U.S. being on the verge of war.

He supplied local markets with crates of oranges from the trees growing in his hot-house basement. He grew giant beets as big as 10 pounds! And he took the time to collect the seeds and experiment with hybrid plants.¹⁰ He grew sweet potatoes on vines like squash, as well as butter-fruit plants and Virginia brown lettuce. Every year Hiram experimented with new fruits and vegetables.¹¹ This sounds incredible given the limited size of his land and that his hot-house basement could not have been very large. He may

FOR SALE — Over 300 boxes of strawberries on the vine. Jumbo Everbearing, loaded with berries, start to ripen soon. Hiram Gardner, last house on Elizabeth Street. J8, 3t, 149

Hiram Gardner's strawberry advertisement, June 10, 1946, in the *Amesbury Daily News*. (From the Community History Archive, Amesbury Public Library.)

have been challenged in getting enough light to his orange and lemon trees. Perhaps the small size of this garden allowed Hiram to give the plants the extra care they needed in the harsh New England climate.

Hiram was well known in the area and he welcomed visitors who came to admire his unusual and exotic plants. People came to see the sweet-scented violets which stood four feet high with blue flowers,¹² and his oranges and lemons (one reported to be as big as 11 inches around).¹³

Hiram developed a hybrid potato which was named the “Gardner Special” by horticulturalists from the University of New Hampshire.¹⁴ These potatoes could grow to be nearly 3 pounds! He grew night-blooming jasper (with over 400 white flowers which bloomed at midnight), potatoes in hay¹⁵ and strawberries in September. Hiram was so successful growing his plants he started a nursery business with his sons.¹⁶

According to census records Hiram never attended school and at least for the first 18 years of his life could not read or write.¹⁷ He learned by paying attention to the world around him. He watched how the animals behaved and how the snow melted. Hiram shared his predictions about the coming growing season, which were often published in the local paper. He offered advice about gardening and life, and was an inspiration to many gardeners.

Hiram passed away on Jan 27, 1951,¹⁸ just shy of his 88th birthday. He is buried in his family lot at Mount Prospect Cemetery in Amesbury.¹⁹ In addition to his farm labors and his paint store, he worked in the mills in town. It is believed he owned a barge that operated from Market Square in the 1880’s and a delivery business he started in 1886. He was a member of the William Lloyd Garrison Lodge, Knights of Pythias.

History shares other legends about the Gardner family. Hiram’s daughter Ruth became the town's first female taxi driver in 1943.²⁰ His son Lawrence Howard fought in WWII and served in the military for over 25 years.²¹ Lawrence married a woman from the Philippines, and his family was taken as prisoners by the Japanese and held for four years before being rescued.²² Hiram’s grandson Lt. Robert Gardner, served with the Army Air Force and was awarded the Silver Star for Gallantry.²³

Today, 70 years later, there is not a leaf left of Hiram’s “Southern Plantation ” on Elizabeth Street. The land has long since been redeveloped and gardens are now left to our imagination.

Hiram Gardner began his life as a slave and had no formal education. He overcame great odds to become a successful landowner and grower. He was able to grow plants that no one could have imagined. He was a respected member of Amesbury and contributed much to the community with his amazing garden.

FOR SALE — Large fancy lace fern, blossoms from April to October. A beautiful house plant. Apply Hiram Gardner, Elizabeth St. S13, 3t, 934

Advertisement for Hiram Gardner's lace fern house plants in the *Amesbury Daily News*, September 15, 1948. (From the Community History Archive, Amesbury Public Library.)

Notes

- ¹ *Amesbury Daily News*, Jan. 29, 1951, p. 2. <https://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/>, Amesbury Public Library: accessed Jan 20, 2022.
- ² Virginia, Washington Co., 1880 U.S. Census, population schedule. Database with images. Ancestry.com: <https://www.ancestry.com>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ *Newburyport Daily News And Newburyport Herald*, Feb 7, 1939 p. 3, Newburyport, Mass. <https://newspaperarchive.com/newburyport-daily-news-and-newburyport-herald-feb-07-1939-p3/>, accessed Jan 20, 2022.
- ⁵ Sampson, Murdock & Co., *Newburyport and Amesbury Directory, 1886-1887, Business Directory, Street Directory, Official Record, Etc.*, No. XXII, p. 225, Amesbury Digital Library, (https://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/viewer/?k=gardner&t=40202&i=t&by=1886&bdd=1880&d=01011882-12311889&m=between&ord=k1&fn=city_directory_usa_massachusetts_newburyport_and_amesbury_1886010_1_english_1&df=1&dt=10), accessed Feb 23, 2022.
- ⁶ “Delegation of Local Merchants And Store Clerks View Unusual Garden Of Elizabeth Street Man,” *Amesbury Daily News*, Aug 17, 1939, p. 1, HTML edition, archived (https://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/viewer/?k=hiram%20gardner&i=f&by=1939&bdd=1930&d=08011939-12311939&m=between&ord=k1&fn=amesbury_daily_news_usa_massachusetts_amesbury_19390817_english_1&df=1&dt=4), database: Amesbury’s Digital Newspapers, accessed Jan 15, 2022.
- ⁷ Massachusetts Essex Co., Plans Bk18 Pl 49, “Plan of Amesbury Park Terrace, Amesbury Mass.,” Nov 1909, digital image, Southern Essex Registry of Deeds, Salem Mass., (<https://salemdeeds.com/salemdeeds/PlanDisplay.aspx?type=PID&src=plbp&book=18&Page=49&booktype=Plan&PID=113704>), accessed on Jan 20, 2022.
- ⁸ *Newburyport Daily News And Newburyport Herald*, Feb 7, 1939, p. 3, Newburyport, Mass., <https://newspaperarchive.com/newburyport-daily-news-and-newburyport-herald-feb-07-1939-p3/>, accessed Jan 20, 2022.
- ⁹ “Grower Of Unusual Garden Edibles says This Country Could Produce All The Coffee Which It Requires,” *The Amesbury Daily News*, Oct 17, 1940, p. 1, HTML edition, archived. (<https://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/>), Amesbury Public Library: accessed Jan 20, 2022.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² “Unusual Violets Grow in Gardner’s Garden,” *Newburyport Daily News And Newburyport Herald*, Aug 18, 1941, p. 3, Newburyport, Mass., HTML edition, archived. (<https://newspaperarchive.com/newburyport-daily-news-and-newburyport-herald-aug-18-1941-p-3/>), database: newspaperarchive.com, accessed Jan 18, 2022.
- ¹³ “Huge Lemon Growing In Gardner’s Garden,” *Newburyport Daily News And Newburyport Herald*, Aug 27, 1941, p. 3, Newburyport, Mass., HTML edition, archived. (<https://newspaperarchive.com/newburyport-daily-news-and-newburyport-herald-aug-27-1941-p-3/>), database: newspaperarchive.com, accessed Jan 18, 2022.
- ¹⁴ “Hybrid Potato Will Be Named for Its Grower,” *Amesbury Daily News*, Nov 5, 1941, p. 2, HTML edition, archived (https://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/viewer/?t=33683&i=t&by=1941&bdd=1940&bm=11&bd=5&d=11051941-11051941&fn=amesbury_daily_news_usa_massachusetts_amesbury_19411105_english_2&df=1&dt=4) database: newspaperarchive.com, accessed Jan 17, 2022.
- ¹⁵ “Here’s Hiram Gardner’s Proof,” *Boston Globe*, Boston Mass., Jul 23, 1943, (https://www.ancestry.com/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/10876273/person/6928840077/media/92ffa40e-6242-4776-95f9-934cca4b88db?_phsrc=Khy2948&usePUBJs=true) Database: database photo ancestry.com, accessed Jan 15, 2022.

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- 16 “Strawberries In September-Boy!” *Newburyport Daily News And Newburyport Herald*, Sept 5, 1945, p. 3, Newburyport, Mass., HTML edition archived, (<https://newspaperarchive.com/newburyport-daily-news-and-newburyport-herald-sep-05-1945-p-3/>), database: newspaperarchive.com, accessed Jan 18, 2022.
- 17 Virginia, Washington Co., 1880 U.S. Census, op. cit.
- 18 “Deaths: Hiram C. Gardner”, *Amesbury Daily News*, op. cit.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 “Amesbury Has Woman Driver,” *Amesbury Daily News*, May 10, 1943, HTML edition, archived (<https://newspaperarchive.com/newburyport-daily-news-and-newburyport-herald-sep-05-1945-p-3/>), database:newspaperarchive.com, accessed Jan 18, 2022.
- 21 “Expects Son’s Family From Philippines Here For Christmas,” *Amesbury Daily News*, Amesbury, Mass., Sep 12, 1944, p. 4, HTML edition, archived (https://amesbury.advantage-preservation.com/viewer/?k=gardner&i=f&by=1944&bdd=1940&d=09121944-09121944&m=on&ord=k1&fn=amesbury_daily_news_usa_massachusetts_amesbury_19440912_english_4&df=1&dt=1), database: Amesbury’s Digital Newspapers, accessed Jan 15, 2022.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.