

A pippin a day made Queen



Courtesy Peter J. Hatch

A host of people helped pack Albemarle pippins at J.T. O'Neill's orchard in Crozet, circa. 1910.

There was a time when kings, queens and commoners alike cherished the taste of a locally grown green apple called the Albemarle pippin.

The pippin became so popular in England during the 19th century that it sold at prices three times those of other American varieties. In 1879 J.F. Wayland, one of the largest fruit growers in Albemarle County, shipped out a boxcar of pippins, destined for the docks of Liverpool.

That same year another local grower, J.W. Porter, sent 700 crates of the apples north to satisfy the nation's taste for the delicious fruit. Growers could sell all the pippins they could produce and the pippin reigned as the "prince of apples."

Today, one will be hard pressed to find an Albemarle pippin: Lucky consumers might find them in a specialty store or at a roadside fruit stand, but



that's about it.

One might wonder how an apple with such a captivating taste as to woo entire generations could, in a matter of a few decades, become all but extinct. It certainly isn't because the pippin lost its flavor.

"Every year we have an apple tasting contest here at Monticello," said Peter J. Hatch, director of gardens and grounds at Monticello. "This year the Albemarle pippin, from two different sources, came in first and second out of 30 different kind of apples."

"They're one of my favorite eating apples, but they're not grown commercially to any extent in the East at all. Like a lot of things, consumers have

gravitated toward visual feasts rather than gourmet feasts.

"Because of that, apples like the pippin that aren't as pretty or handsome no longer have the commercial appeal.

One of the great qualities of the pippin is that it stores so well.

"It's almost better in the late winter than when it's picked off the tree around this time of year. That's sort of irrelevant now that everyone has refrigeration."

In Hatch's book "The Fruits and Fruit Trees of Monticello," he writes that Thomas Jefferson's favorite eating apples were the Albemarle pippin and the esopus Spitzenburg.

In 1769 two rows of pippin trees were planted at Monticello. During the next 35 years more than 170 more were added.

In Jefferson's day, what is now called the Albemarle pippin was referred to as the Newtown pippin. According to Hatch's research, the pippin originated at Newtown, N.Y., in the early 1700s.

The original tree came from a seedling that was found growing in a swamp located on the estate of Gershom Moore. The area is now Queens.

It's believed the original tree lived until 1805. It might have lived much longer, but for decades it was subjected to continuous cuttings by grafters. That finally led to its demise.

Just when and how the pippin first came to this area isn't certain, but Hatch presents two local stories dealing with this subject in his book. The first has it that by 1765 a seedling pippin tree in North Garden was creating something of a stir for producing fine fruit.

Victoria keep taxes away

A better documented account relates how Dr. Thomas Walker, a friend of Jefferson, picked up a scion wood of the Newtown pippin in Pennsylvania in 1755 and planted it on his Castle Hill estate in Albemarle County. This could well have been the father tree for the pippin trees that followed in this area.

Benjamin Franklin did his part in spreading the word, via taste buds, of the wonderful taste of the pippins. In 1759, when he was in London, he had barrels of the fruit shipped to him.

Franklin didn't hoard the apples for his own eating pleasure, but shared them with his English friends. The apples proved to be so popular that a few years later Englishman Peter Collinson was planting scion wood from America.

The people who probably did the most to promote the Albemarle pippin to the Brits were Andrew Stevenson and his wife, Sallie Coles Stevenson, an Albemarle County native.

In 1836 Stevenson was named American minister to the Court of St. James, and he and his wife set up housekeeping in London. In 1838, perhaps to get a taste of home, the couple had two barrels of locally grown pippins and a barrel of Virginia hams sent to them.

The apples arrived in splendid shape, and Mrs. Stevenson selected a couple dozen of the best specimens and sent them as a gift to the new queen, Victoria. The apples created "a great sensation at the palace" and the queen declared them to be one of her favorites:

Queen Victoria was so impressed with the pippin that she lifted an English export tax on imported apples. Within a decade, the pippin was commanding the highest price of any apple in the Covent Garden Market in London.

By this time, the Newtown pippin was carrying its new name — Albemarle pippin. Hatch said the name Albemarle pippin first appeared in print on the editorial page of the *Southern Planter* in 1843.

"The editorial writer was complaining about the importation of Yankee apples into Virginia," Hatch said. "He said, 'Why do we need these northern apples when the best apple there is is the pippin from Albemarle?'"

"Hence, the name Albemarle pippin became attached to the ones grown around here."

Because growers could get more money for their pippins on the English market, by 1898 it was being grown primarily for export. The bottom started coming out of the apple barrel soon after the end of World War I, when the British government reinstated import taxes on American apples to give their own apple industry a boost.

This didn't help the local industry. A few other reasons have been put forward to explain the pippins' steady decline during the past century. One local story has it that some growers, eager to cash in, began picking the fruit too early and, in so doing, arrested the apple's developing taste.

The tree's habit of producing fruit every other year didn't make it a favorite among efficiency-minded orchardists either. Hatch thinks that even its "complex" flavor might now work against it.

"The Albemarle pippin is not real sugary sweet," Hatch said. "It has a poignancy that many people seem to have lost an interest in."

"There's been a general sort of blandness of taste that has taken over the taste buds of American consumers in some way."

The crisp fruit holds a taste that is both tart and sweet, and can vary from apple to apple.

Those who set out in search of the Albemarle pippin and meet reward, will likely find their time well spent. While the pippin might not win any beauty contests, it certainly deserves its princely crown for taste.

The Daily Progress

Sunday, October 21, 2001