

Creating a British Country House and Garden in Colonial Carolina

The wealth and prominence of the Drayton family in the early 1700s provided John Drayton with a financial advantage that few colonists had during the formative years of the South Carolina Colony. As John moved into adulthood, he sought to create his colonial homestead on a 350-acre estate that bordered his birthplace at Magnolia Plantation. John played a significant role in the design and construction of what would become Drayton Hall—the first fully executed example of Palladian architecture in the colonies. He relied largely on enslaved laborers to build the structures and sculpt the landscape according to increasingly popular styles found in contemporary Georgian Britain.

Stop one: NORTH FLANKER BUILDING

1 John Drayton emulated British estates when he designed Drayton Hall in the mid-1700s to present himself as equivalent to a gentleman. Influenced by Palladian style architecture, John had two smaller structures built simultaneously with the main house to give an impressive appearance for those arriving to the landside of the house. In order to achieve symmetry and to keep the view of the house and adjoining flankers on a square perspective, John used a clever design trick. By constructing the flanker buildings on a five-degree offset from the sides of the house, this has the effect of making the whole appear square. Had this design not been used and the buildings were actually square, the two flankers would have a pointing inward look. How the family and enslaved used the flankers is unknown, but they potentially served as guest rooms, extra kitchen space, laundry rooms, offices, storage, or living quarters for some of the enslaved. Due to poor maintenance and natural disasters in the late 1800s, neither flanker building remains standing. As you envision Drayton Hall with the flankers, imagine a curved colonnade on either side of the main structure, connecting to both flankers as seen in the 1765 watercolor (IMAGE A). Much of the details about the colonnade remain a mystery, including whether it served as a covered walkway and why it no longer exists.

Stop two: PRIVY

2 This privy, constructed c.1791, was not built by the time of John's death in 1779. It is probable that previous privies preceded this one on the property for use by John and his family. Wealthy families like the Draytons relied on an enslaved workforce to empty, clean, and maintain chamber pots inside the bedchambers. (IMAGE C)

Stop three: HA-HA

3 Charles Drayton, John's son who purchased the house from his stepmother in 1783, continued his father's interest in the landscape and gardens. Charles likely had this double-sloped ditch, known in Europe as a ha-ha, dug with a wood rail fence in the bottom. This had the effect of retaining a sweeping view across the lawn toward the river and gardens, while

holding grazing livestock within the lawn area. Charles not only continued the adaptation of British trends but added a scholarly, worldly horticultural component to further the landscape his father had realized. In writings from 1796, the Duke Lainescourt writes, "In order to have a fine garden, you have nothing to do but to let the trees remain standing here and there, or in clumps, to plant bushes in front of them, and arrange the trees according to their height. Dr. Drayton's father [John]... began to lay out the garden on this principle; and his son, who is passionately fond of country life, has pursued the same plan." The use of asymmetrical plantings in the arrangement of plant heights was very common in English landscape gardens. The riverside gardens provided both guests and the family with views of the river and plantings as they took social strolls.

Stop four: GARDEN HOUSE

4 Now a ruin, this garden house completed c.1747 likely served several purposes. The garden house was oriented toward the house rather than the river. The facade facing the main house was all decorative brick. Visitors and family used this space as a wayside while strolling through the gardens. "Taking a turn" through a country gentleman's garden was a social practice and firmly part of British culture of the time (IMAGE E). John Drayton sought to emulate those practices in the colonies. The garden house provided scenic views of the river with its raised vantage point, but potentially also looked onto a bowling green, a space where recreational activities would occur. The connection to the river, both through views and cooling breezes certainly played a part in its location. Owning land on the Ashley River had greater significance beyond its beauty, however. Real estate by waterways cost significantly more than land further inland. Rivers provided the ability to move people, and more importantly to carry marketable products to and from properties to sell in seaport markets. The wealthiest families in Charleston owned land along the Ashley and Cooper Rivers.

Stop five: AZALEA ALLÉE

5 The pathway between the river and the house was a design and installation of the late 19th century and included the addition of trees, Indica Azaleas, and a foot bridge over the ha-ha. It is likely that John maintained this part of the garden as an open viewshed from the rear landing of the house from which to view the river and gardens. Nevertheless, actions during the American Revolution significantly altered the early garden. Charleston became a focal point in a southern military strategy adopted by the British midway through the war. In March of 1780, British forces arrived at Drayton Hall to encamp on the property with the intention of crossing the Ashley River in an attempt to encircle Charleston. Hessian troops under Captain Ewald were the first to arrive. "On the 23rd, about eight o'clock, Captain Boyd and I received orders to try and get to Drayton's house," he wrote in March of 1780. He continued, "Toward noon we reached the zoological garden of Drayton's plantation, where we took post and were near out of danger." The Royal Navy later arrived with roughly seventy-five flatboats to help with troop movements on the Ashley. The gardens and landscape suffered considerable damage from thousands of encamped troops on the property.

Stop six: DRAYTON MEMORIAL

6 This modern memorial for deceased members of the Drayton family has a grim connection to the colonial era. At the time of its construction, the inspiration for the design on the center of the stone originated from a branding iron. Later analysis of the branding iron's size and silver material revealed its use as a brand for human flesh. Throughout American slave society, some slaveowners used brands as a form of punishment or as a way to mark humans as legal property. The Drayton family, like the other elite families of Charleston, depended heavily on the institution of slavery as a labor force and way to maintain elite lifestyles. As the colony grew, the perceived need for enslaved labor grew with it. White South Carolina colonists relied upon the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, which forced Africans into enslavement and sold them as property. Another reminder of these conditions is Drayton Hall's African American cemetery, which dates to the colonial era and can be found closer to the entrance gate. (See IMAGE 8 for an example of colonoware made and used by the enslaved community at Drayton Hall).

Stop seven: GRAVESITE

7 This is a gravestone for Charlottea Drayton's (1804–1909) dog, Nipper. There are no known historic Draytons buried on the property. John Drayton's death is still a mystery. When the British Army marched toward Drayton Hall in the spring of 1779, John and his family fled the property. While crossing the Cooper River, John suffered a health impairment and died while fleeing the British. John's burial site remains unknown. The reason he fled is also unclear. With his son, William Henry, serving in the Continental Congress and other sons involved militarily, perhaps John feared retribution by British officers. While there are no written records of John's views of the war, three of his sons did serve on the Continental side of the war. For the British, they pinned their hopes of victory on gaining control of the southern colonies and tapping into perceived loyalist support, yet success at doing so became more elusive than they predicted. Rebecca Drayton, John's fourth wife, returned to Drayton Hall after John's death. Captain Ewald noted her presence at Drayton Hall while his troops encamped on the property, writing, "We requested Mrs. Vice Governor Drayton to refresh our hungry souls with bread and wine, which she gladly did, and in return for which she received a sawnlog." (safeguard)

Stop eight: REFLECTION POND

8 This reflection pond is a late 19th-century expansion of a fresh water creek that traveled from the large ponds to the marsh. Before John's time the simple creek served a functional purpose of draining water from the reservoir ponds to the lower fields for watering rice or other crops. The mound that you see in front of the house is comprised of the dirt removed to make the pond. During the colonial era, the driveway extended to the front steps of the portico. (IMAGE A)

Stop nine: GRAND OAK

9 The live oak you are standing next to likely predates John Drayton's purchase of the property in 1738. John incorporated the tree into the landscape as it serves as an anchor for a line of live oaks that stretch both north and south. Imagine a landscape more open and pastoral. The large ponds, the flowing creek, and large single or clusters of trees interspersed within the great lawn, made for a dramatic panorama of the English style landscape. Luckily, for over 280 years, this grand oak has survived lumber needs, wars, hurricanes, and disease.

Stop ten: ORNAMENTAL PONDS

10 Drayton Hall's networks of ponds were originally part of a natural watercourse that carried fresh water toward the Ashley River. Once occupied by Europeans in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the watercourse was adapted for the inland cultivation of rice. The entrance road was part of this system as it served as a dam holding fresh water in a reserve pond while allowing rice cultivation in the fields to the south. Following John's purchase of the property in 1738, he regarded the ponds as ornamental features. Drayton Hall served as a showplace and did not serve in the mass production of cash crops or commerce. Instead, the capital to own such a large house and property derived from other sources. John owned a vast network of landholdings, upward of 76,000 acres, which relied on hundreds of enslaved laborers to raise cattle and grow cash crops of rice and indigo. In the 1700s, rice was the main cash crop of the Carolina Lowcountry. Those who had land and the capital to have an enslaved workforce became some of the wealthiest—and most influential—colonists. Rice cultivation was a driving economic force in the region and literally and figuratively shaped the layout of coastal Carolina and Georgia.



NOTE: ALLIGATORS ARE COMMON IN THIS AREA AND CAN BE DANGEROUS. PLEASE KEEP YOUR DISTANCE.

