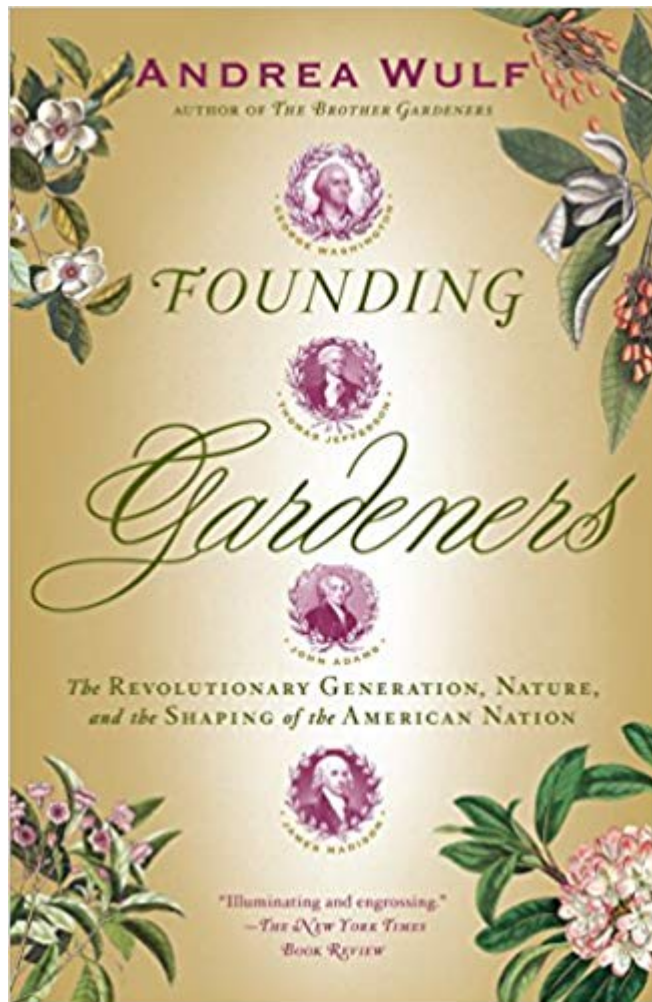
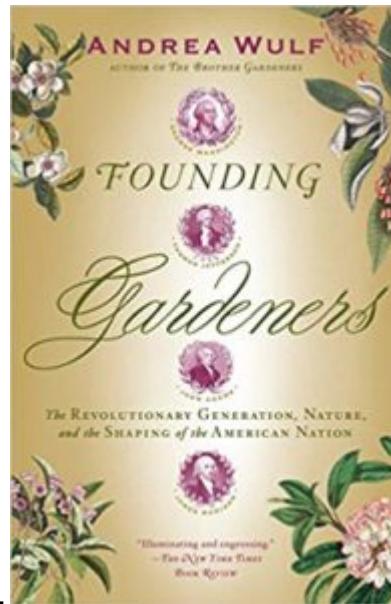


Landscape with Figures



As approaching British warships menaced Manhattan in the summer of 1776, George Washington nevertheless snatched time from his preparations to send instructions about the rhododendrons, laurels, and crab apples, the “clever kind[s] of trees (especially flowering ones),” to be planted on either side of his house (14). This moment reveals the heart of Andrea Wulf’s *Founding Gardeners*, which shows us the remarkable extent to which founders like Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Madison engaged the world of gardening. They designed gardens, wrote about them, and toured them; they retired to them both as rest and as political maneuver; they swapped specimens and foreign seeds, experimented with new manures, and designed new gardening implements. “It’s impossible,” Wulf contends, “to understand the making of America without looking at the founding fathers as farmers and gardeners” (4). Building gardens and thinking about them, political figures both made arguments about American identity and attempted concretely to shape the American future. Wulf’s chapters follow a series of episodes beginning with the Revolution and ending with Jefferson’s and Adams’s deaths in 1826. In each episode, gardens, forests,



fields, and parks play multiple roles.

Throughout the book, Wulf explores gardens' symbolic power. In these controlled spaces, founders built microcosms of their imagined American landscape. Where Washington's unique assembly of native trees at Mount Vernon invoked national unity, Adams's French-inspired *ferme ornée*, or "ornamented farm," asserted the continued centrality of agrarian virtue; and Madison's model slave quarters served as the stage upon which he could display paternalistic benevolence (a benevolence, Wulf points out, not evidenced in the living conditions of the majority of his slaves). If texts shaped gardens, so too did gardens shape texts. References to grafting, growth, and seeds infused the rhetoric of the early republic, placed there by authors who were also often planters or wealthy farmers for whom these concepts had concrete meaning. Wulf's descriptions of founding gardens can help us see yet another realm in which the new nation was being imagined and debated and can show us the "liberty tree" from new angles.

In making these gestures, Wulf demonstrates how the founders spoke a transatlantic language laid out by British writers and gardeners. This becomes particularly clear in a chapter on Adams's and Jefferson's 1786 tour of English gardens—part wounded retreat from London diplomacy, part pilgrimage to landscapes of meaning created by British Whigs of a previous generation. On this trip, Jefferson and Adams visited places like Stowe, built according to the prescriptions of essayist Joseph Addison. Stowe's designers intended its freely curving pathways and naturalistic plantings as a Whiggish rebuke to the gardens of Versailles, whose rigid designs attested to monarchical authority. Stowe's extensive array of moralizing statuary, moreover, allowed visitors literally to choose between the path of vice, adorned with adulteresses, and the path of virtue, decorated with philosophers (Adams and Jefferson took the latter option at Adams's insistence). The founders built their gardens in conversation with and sometimes in opposition to such British spaces.

Though attention to symbolism is Wulf's main focus, she also makes clear the extent to which their interest in gardening informed the founders' concerns for

the national economy. At a time when the wealth of the new nation derived from farming, importing exotic plants (a category which should include such homely crops as Mediterranean wheat and rice) and establishing the systems of practice needed to make plants valuable were vitally important. Within this context, Washington's trials of plaister and Jefferson's smuggling of rice seeds or even his "mammoth cucumbers" became practical steps towards a particular agrarian future.

In *Founding Gardeners*, Wulf reinterprets iconic figures and iconic events. Her work will, I hope, bring the neglected realm of garden history to a new group of readers. At times, however, the prominence of the figures she studies allows them to overshadow the larger networks within which they acted. While Wulf valuably illuminates the connections between American revolutionaries and British Whigs, it would have been wonderful to see these connections further extended to the globe-spanning botanical networks then being set up by the European empires, which have been beautifully examined by historians of science like Lisbet Koerner, James Enderby, and Emma Spary. As Washington fretted about his tobacco plants, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention eagerly swapped pecan nuts for planting, and Jefferson commissioned Meriwether Lewis to assemble a herbarium of native species, the British were using their botanical gardens to realign world trade around other organisms: the opium poppy, tea leaves, and new varieties of sugar cane. The founders' gardens were moves made in this larger game.

More attention to the international context would also have been helpful in the chapter titled "Balance of Nature," examining Madison's famous 1818 address to the Albemarle Agricultural Society. To Wulf, this address was groundbreaking, a "complex and innovative" statement of a new environmental sensibility, though a sensibility with important antecedents (206). Though Wulf is justified in stressing that attention to care of the land did not begin with George Perkins Marsh, she overemphasizes the address's novelty, and in doing so, necessarily deemphasizes the genre of publication from which it emerged. For example, Wulf cites the wide distribution of the address as a sign of its impact; we might see the same phenomenon as a sign of the robust transatlantic network of periodicals and newspapers, agricultural societies, and corresponding gentlemen already set up to draw such addresses into a broad and productive conversation.

As she examines brightly limned figures in the foreground, Wulf also struggles to deal with the people the founders themselves held purposely in the background, the slaves who planted the trees of Mount Vernon and who painstakingly scythed the lawns of Monticello and Montpelier. In an effort to acknowledge their role, Wulf dots much of her text with brief references to their labor, though often in the footnotes. Enslaved people come into real focus only in their public role in Madison's staged slave cottages at Montpelier. Wulf herself is aware of the extent to which the labor of slaves was purposefully obscured by slaveholders themselves—at Mount Vernon, she explains, Washington used plantings to carefully delineate the spaces occupied by slaves, and forbade them to enter the bowling green or the shrubberies. It

would have been nice to see Wulf disrupt the beauty of the landscape she describes with more explicit references to its exploitative underpinnings, perhaps by threading episodes of a counternarrative through the relevant chapters. This would have allowed her to acknowledge not only the physical labor of enslaved people, but also the skill and forms of natural knowledge they deployed to turn instructions and plans into living landscapes.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *Founding Gardeners* is a well-researched, intriguing, and beautifully written book. The questions that it leaves unanswered will hopefully open new pathways for other historians to follow.