

Developing the Lady Fenwick Garden

I began gardening at the Hart House gardens in the spring of 2015. While discussing with Linda Kinsella, the Hart House garden keeper, what role I could play in this already mature and award winning garden, I mentioned that I had a specific interest in planting and harvesting herbs. This turned out to be a perfect fit. For a few years Linda's intention was to re-develop an earlier culinary herb garden that had been created in the 1990s but had fallen fallow due to lack of attention. The ultimate goal for this re-created annual herb garden would be to support today's First Church of Christ Shoreline Food Pantry. That summer we began weekly deliveries of posies of parsley, mints, chives, tarragon, rosemary, dill, thyme and basil to our neighbors. This garden continues to flourish during the summer months.

In the spring of 2016 I developed a second herb garden with a focus on teaching local grade school children and visitors to the Hart House about the importance of herbs in 18th century households. This garden was called "Herbs with a Purpose" where medicinal, household and cosmetic perennial herbs were planted. These same herbs would have been useful and beautiful in 1767 when used by Mrs. Esther Buckingham Hart to care for her family's health needs and domestic management. Breathing life into these new herb gardens was relatively easy since the soil was in excellent condition, and the crops grew like wildflowers.

Having just studied for two winters about early American gardens and herbs, and the women who tended them, I had a firm hold on what herbs were native to North America, what herbs would typically be shipped from England for the 6-7 week journey across the Atlantic. I began to think critically about medicinal herbs. While they could be ornamental plants, they were also a matter of life or death importance to colonial families, not only aboard ship but the moment the settlers landed in North America. Responsibilities for the health and welfare of the family fell solely on the wife and mother. Having been a Women's Studies minor when completing my bachelor's degree, I had a background in the writings of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Rebecca J Tannenbaum, Anne Dudley Bradstreet and Joy Day Buel. These writers, among others, wrote extensively about 17th and 18th century women's household duties, the hardships endured just to survive, and the related themes of family dynamics. While reuniting with my old texts and

materials I delved again into this fascinating subject at the same time discovering new authors to enlighten me further.

Being a new member of the Old Saybrook community, I became charmed by Lady Alice Botelier Fenwick (1613c-1645), wife of Puritan George Fenwick who became governor of the Saybrook Colony in 1637. What was Lady Fenwick's life like at the Saybrook Fort? Who supported her when she was pregnant three times in this wilderness of early 17th century America? Was she really the *first* recorded woman gardener in the thirteen colonies? Was she also the *first* woman in Connecticut to have a tombstone? What about Mary Barrett Dyer (1611-1660) of Massachusetts, Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591-1643) of Rhode Island, and Elizabeth Reade Winthrop (1614-1672) of Connecticut? They were all contemporaries of Lady Fenwick, and followed the same path – being born in England and transplanted to America's Massachusetts Bay Colony with their husbands. Where much of recorded history has ignored women's roles in the settlement of New England, these women among others have been recognized for their determination, focus on their personal beliefs, and their desire to be successful in new found lives in a world across the sea. Surely these women gardened, and understood the benefits and necessities of herbs in their gardens? This again raised the question of why Lady Fenwick received the laurels of 'firsts'.

It was when I read Ann Leighton's (aka Isadore Smith) *Early English Gardens in America*, published in 1970, that I learned why Lady Fenwick was so revered. George Fenwick had written to John Winthrop Sr. in Massachusetts "...*We both desire and delight much in the primitive imployment of dressing a garden,*" and "*Kindly on my wife's behalf {we thank you} for your great dainties chirrie and peach trees, a good nurserie of apples,*" and "*The taste of so good fruites in these parts gives us good encouragement,*" thereby documenting that his wife gardened at Fort Saybrook. This mention of his wife by Governor Fenwick was unique in its day and has stood the test of time. I knew then that devoting a garden to this brave, endearing and devoted woman would be the focus of my next garden at the Historical Society's campus.

In the spring of 2017 the Lady Fenwick Memorial Garden became a reality. The herbs selected for this garden consist of those both native to America, and those transported by roots and seeds from England by the colonists during their long journeys across the

Atlantic. These particular herbs represent 17th century plants that would have been used most likely by midwives and Native Americans to care for women's unique health issues related to menstruation, fertility, pregnancy, morning sickness, childbirth, post-partum recovery, lactation, infection, contraception, and menopause. With sincere reverence to Lady Fenwick, who gardened for pleasure as well as necessity, and to all early Colonial women who helped pioneer our nation, we continue to study and learn about the herbs that our ancestors so cherished and which sustained their bodies and souls.

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