



Layers of History

In its early decades, Chatham included more than 1,300 acres and probably two dozen outbuildings. The enslaved workers of Chatham's builder, William Fitzhugh, were noted for their many skills—carpenters, millers, blacksmiths, and even a jockey for Fitzhugh's many racehorses. Buildings once on the landscape reflected these trades.

Of Chatham's original outbuildings, only the kitchen and laundry survive. Still, the road network and the riverside terraces date to Chatham's earliest years.

The walled garden and most of the surviving outbuildings were built in the early 20th century.



Image Courtesy Cumberland County (NJ) Historical Society

On the Garden Side

The Kitchen

Southeast of the main house is the original kitchen. For decades, the fireplaces roared hours each day as enslaved people, mostly women, prepared food for both the owners and their many guests. During one two-week period in the 1790s, visitors to Chatham consumed 21 calves, sheep, lambs, and goats, three sturgeon from the river, and innumerable chickens—all prepared by servants in the kitchen. Those who worked in the kitchen likely also slept there.

The Gardens

The formal garden that graces Chatham's entrance walk recalls Virginia's preference for Colonial Revival gardens in the early 20th century. Ellen Biddle Shipman, one of America's most prominent female landscape architects, designed an intricate enclosed garden populated by walkways, statuary, trees, and parterre beds. Later owner John Lee Pratt removed most of the beds, but the National Park Service re-established them in the 1980s.

The Laundry

Across the garden from the kitchen is Chatham's laundry. For the enslaved people who likely lived in this building, "wash day" constituted hard work: hauling water for washing and wood for fires; heating water in large copper pots; scrubbing the owners' clothes, bedding, and linens; and then the tedious process of rinsing, drying, and ironing (and occasionally starching). In the 20th century, Chatham's owners converted the building to a guest house.

On the River Side

Witness Trees

Four of Chatham's trees—all of them now gnarled, some of them broken—stood as witnesses to the coming of war to this place in 1862. Poet Walt Whitman may have been referring to one of the catalpa trees near the NW corner of the house when he wrote, "Outdoors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, etc.—about a load for a one-horse cart." The two black locusts on the river side of the house also appear clearly in Civil War photographs.

Soldiers' Graves

After the Civil War, reburial teams removed 133 Union dead (only 23 of them identified) from the grounds of Chatham for interment in the Fredericksburg National Cemetery. Decades later, workers for 20th century owner John Lee Pratt discovered three more graves of Union soldiers. Rather than have them removed, Pratt had the graves marked, and today they remain.

The Terraces

Likely built with the labor of slaves, the terraces helped create usable space from sloping ground. They are common features on many Virginia plantations. Before the Civil War, these terraces were home to formal gardens. A Union officer described them to his daughter: "[The garden is] made in terraces—which are like steps—very large steps & very high steps they would be! The sweet scented shrubs which I sent to you...grew upon the upper terrace, in large bushes. There are also beautiful trees upon the terraces and rose bushes ever so many! And other blooming plants, all of which make the air very sweet."