

# Kirk Boott and the Greening of Boston, 1783–1845

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## **Despite travail, despite tragedy, Kirk Boott and his family contributed much to the early years of horticulture and botany in the metropolis of New England**

A love for growing plants seemed to run in the Boott family. Kirk Boott (1755–1817), his father before him, and his several sons after him, had a passion for plants, expressed either through horticulture or botany. In their widely differing lives, lives which included important accomplishments as well as bleak tragedy, this was one linking strand.

Members of the Boott family shared another bias. Even those whose earliest years were spent in Boston felt a strong cultural and familial bond with England, the land from which their parents had come. Indeed, two sons, when grown, moved permanently to England.

In the middle of the Eighteenth Century, one Francis Boott owned and operated a market garden in the town of Derby in the English Midlands. For about twenty-five years—the whole of his adult life—he and his wife and their children worked together on this shared enterprise. Francis's sons worked with him on a couple of acres at the edge of town, where they raised vegetables and young hawthorn plants for hedges. One son, Kirk, recalled rising early to bunch radishes (three bunches for a penny) and bouncing along in the cabbage cart behind "Old Jack," their horse.<sup>1</sup> They took the vegetables to be sold by Mrs. Boott and her daughters from a shop at the front of the family's house. The shop prospered and earned for the Bootts the respect of the denizens of Derby, even those "far higher in station and fortune."<sup>2</sup>

Francis lived only to the age of forty-four. After he died in 1776, his five sons scattered to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Their widowed mother and two sisters remained in the narrow little house in Derby, dependent thereafter on the young men to send money home.

One of Francis's sons found a position as gardener on an estate, where he had three men under him.<sup>3</sup> The second son, Kirk, left home for London in 1783, when he was twenty-seven. He found work as a porter in a warehouse but aimed higher. To improve his image and his chances, he went to a fashionable *friseur* for a powdered wig.<sup>4</sup> To his sister he wrote, "[F]rom small beginnings I shall rise to be a Merchant, and traverse the Ocean to distant shores, with the merchandise of Britain, and at last come [home] to Derby. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Within five months of leaving home, Kirk had arranged for passage aboard the *Rosamond* to Boston.

Kirk found people to back his venture. Friends paid for his trans-Atlantic passage and furnished him with goods so that he could open a shop when he arrived, gambling on his success to recoup their investments. The diverse shop merchandise that Kirk took with him included hats, nails, and barrels of garden seeds.

When he landed in June 1783, Kirk Boott found Boston so green and beautiful that he lamented England's so recent loss of this country. His first letter home sounds like a

market gardener's son writing:

Peas have been in a week or more and now sold at 4/6 sterling per peck. I took a walk in the garden belonging to my Lodging House, and saw Kidney Beans one foot high and cucumbers more than that long. They are forwarder than with us. I have made some enquiry after gardening, but can get very undifferent accounts. The gardeners are slovens and idle.<sup>6</sup>

His initial optimism waned quickly. The American economy was in a shambles after the Revolutionary War, and Boott's business went very badly at first. His merchandise seemed all wrong. He wrote his sister that he rued the day he had forsaken the simple life of a market gardener in Derby. In time, how-



The Boott house in Derby, England, with the greengrocer shop at the front. (The spots are in the original.)  
Courtesy of Bradley R. Parker.

ever, his straightforward business ethic—to sell better goods at lower prices than his competitors—enabled him to become established. He repaid his debts, began sending money home, and was soon well on the way to success and prosperity.

Boott soon threw away his powdered pigtail in order to become more American in appearance. American women, however, held little appeal for him. But no matter. He soon lost his heart to another newly arrived English emigrée, Mary Love, whose father was captain of the ship that had brought Boott to Boston. They were married in 1785.

Kirk Boott was an urban man. Although his youth had been spent working the soil, his boyhood home and his family's existence had centered on selling produce in the center of town. When he came to the United States, the town life of a merchant was Boott's goal. An early foray into the hinterland, as far as southern New Hampshire, persuaded him that rural New England was rocky, densely wooded, and far less beautiful than Old England. When he was financially able to build a fine house for his family, a site in town near his place of business was his obvious choice.

During Kirk Boott's lifetime American cities began the increase in density and in area that so changed this country. Kirk's attachment to urban life was tempered by ambivalence. He apparently believed that regular escape from the city was necessary for one's physical and mental well-being. He bought himself a horse and rode a few miles into the country every morning before seven. Repeatedly, he expressed the regret that he had not explored "the grand, bold, and picturesque scenery with which this country abounds," but somehow he was always too busy to travel, except in winter, when it was too cold, or in summer, when it was too hot.<sup>7</sup>

In 1795, Kirk wrote his sister that "Mr. Theodore Lyman, a worthy friend of ours, has lately bought a Farm. He seems to take much pleasure in it."<sup>8</sup> Boott had collaborated with Lyman in such mercantile adventures as

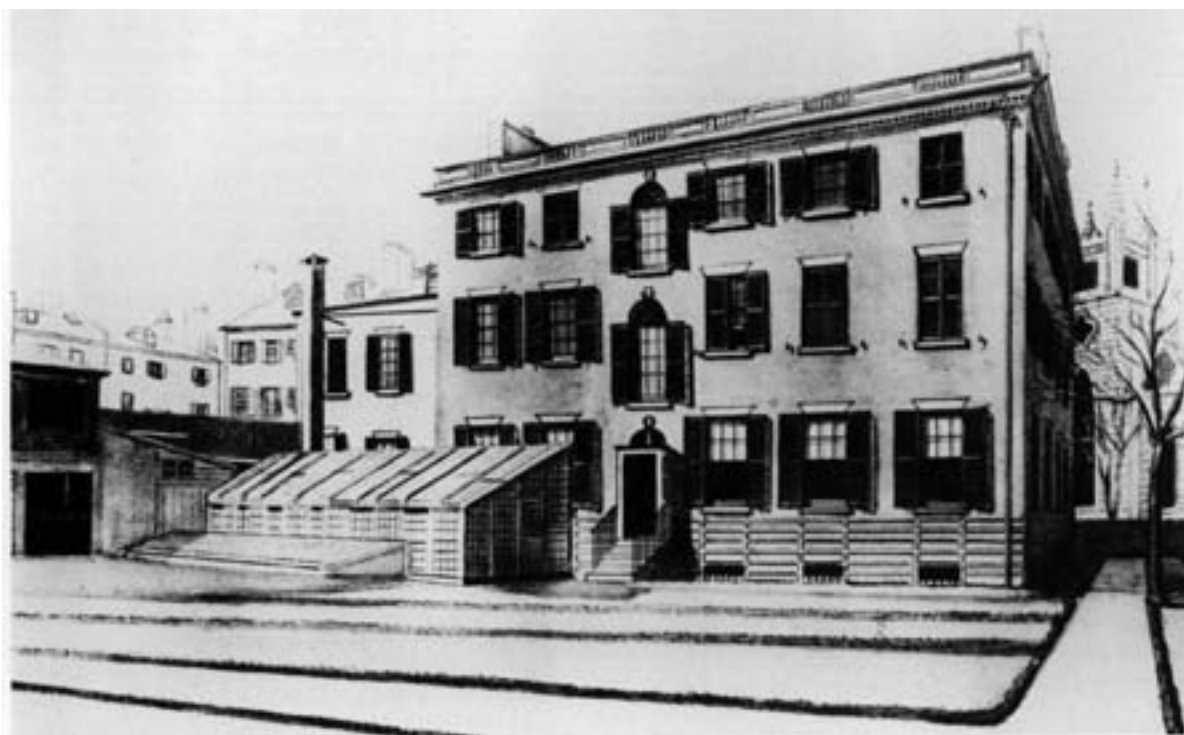
sending a ship to the Pacific Northwest in quest of furs. The Lyman estate, "The Vale," in Waltham, not far from Boston, was one of the first places in Boston to be laid out in the informal English landscape style, following the precepts of designer Humphry Repton. Theodore Lyman had greenhouses and a high brick wall to hasten the ripening of the peaches espaliered against it. Kirk Boott, perambulating Lyman's acres, may have wondered briefly whether he, too, should establish his family in a country seat.

When yellow fever struck Boston in 1798, all who could fled the city. The sparsely settled countryside was generally viewed as a healthier environment than the city. Lyman urged Boott to escape from the unwholesome city, even offering to provide a house for the family, and to send a team of oxen to bring

them to Waltham. Boott turned down Lyman's offer, but after listening day and night to the sound of hammer and saw at a nearby coffinmaker's shop, he closed his store and left Boston—by then nearly a ghost town—until the epidemic had waned. The Bootts rented quarters in outlying Watertown, Theodore Lyman generously supplying them with produce and cider.<sup>9</sup>

#### **A Mansion and a Garden**

By 1802 Kirk Boott was at the height of his prosperity. Neither he nor anyone else foresaw the trade embargo that would punish American business so severely a few years later. Confident of his continuing financial success, Kirk decided to build a townhouse for himself and his family. His wife worried about the expense, but Kirk thanked God that



*The rear of the Boott mansion, Bowdoin Square, Boston, showing the lean-to greenhouse, with hotbeds below it, and trellises for plants along the brick walls of the house. This engraving was made between 1840 and 1847 by an unknown artist. Courtesy of the Boston Athenæum.*

he was "enabled to provide liberally for [his family's] wants."<sup>10</sup>

The half-acre site of Boott's brick house was a pasture in Boston's West End, an area which was just then beginning to be developed.<sup>11</sup> Charles Bulfinch, Boston's leading architect, may have been the designer of Boott's three-story Federal mansion, with its tall, Palladian windows lighting the staircase.<sup>12</sup> Kirk's oldest son, Wright, just home from school in England, described the new house in 1805 as "larger than I expected, and as much handsomer. The doors on the first floor are all Mahogany and so highly polished as to make the furniture look ordinary."<sup>13</sup> Soon, according to Wright, his father was buying new mahogany furniture, Turkish carpets, and a stock of wine.

Kirk Boott joined other fashionable Bostonians in having Gilbert Stuart paint his portrait. Boott and his family mingled socially with Boston's leading families. Gardiner Greene's nearby townhouse, set amidst elaborate terraced gardens, was one to which the Bootts were often invited. Mr. and Mrs. Boott reciprocated with a cotillion in their own gleaming mansion.

Attached to Kirk Boott's new house was one feature that may have meant more to him than any other: a greenhouse. Having been raised as a gardener, one aspect of English life that Boott missed particularly was the long growing season. As he wrote in 1804, "from the severity of the winter, no garden seeds could be put into the ground before April."<sup>14</sup> Inside his own greenhouse, Boott could feel that he had defeated winter.

Boott had had a garden almost ever since he first landed in Boston. Each year he raised all the vegetables his family could eat, and some for the neighbors. He once boasted that "I have not had occasion to buy a cucumber or onion this year, and Mary has had a fine show of annual flowers, Balsam, China Asters, etc. . . ."<sup>15</sup> He had his sister send him some gooseberry bushes, a fruit he missed. They were not a success. He also had her send vege-

table seeds from England, specifying such favorites as "the best green, purple, and white Broccoli."<sup>16</sup>

His new greenhouse flourished during its first season. In December 1805, he wrote that he had "Roses, Jassamines, Geraniums, and stocks in blow [bloom]," and that bulbs sent to him by an English gardening friend were already "shooting above the earth."<sup>17</sup> Boott knew nonetheless that

ere January shall be passed Jack Frost will give us trouble eno' to resist. If this bold intruder can be kept out, I promise myself much pleasure [in the greenhouse] during . . . Feb'y, March, and April, at which time we have but little vegetation. I have taken great pains to keep Lettuce alive thro' the winter. . . .

By April, sure enough, "Winter yet bears sway," he wrote, but happily,

my Greenhouse has flourished beyond my expectation, and what pleases me much, I have found my skill equal to the care of it. Lettuces in abundance I have preserved, and have had fine Sallads thro' the Winter. Yesterday I gathered about a Bushel and gave it to my friends.<sup>18</sup>

Lettuce was equal in importance to flowers in Kirk Boott's greenhouse; he knew his family's health depended on it.

Boott kept a cow on his small lot of land, but every remaining square foot was used for his garden. His 1809 description reveals as much about the gardener as the garden:

Our chief pleasure is in our family, and among our flowering plants. Flora has decked our parlour windows for four months past in the most gay and beautiful manner. She is now about transferring her beauties to the open garden. I have more than one hundred Rosetrees of the best kinds just bursting into bloom, from the moss down to the Scotch Mountain—the cluster Monthly red, the Cabbage province, pompon De Meaux, Burgundy, Blandford, Violet, White musk, etc., etc.

From the first dawn of vegetation I have a

succession of flowers, the modest snowdrop, the golden Crocus, Daffodils, Narcissus, Hyacinths, Cowslips, Tulips etc. Those from Derby never blow but with the most pleasing association of ideas. The common weeds of my garden are the greenhouse Geraniums, Balsams, Coxcombs, Botany-Bay Xeranthemums, Mignonette, etc. and yet a common observer would think there was hardly anything worth looking at.

The Hawthorne—the White Hawthorne is now in full bloom.<sup>19</sup>

Boott had his oldest son write to gardening friends in Derby for more English flowers, London Pride and "Bird's Eye" [?], since "there are none in the country hereabouts. Daisies are such a rarity that they are kept in greenhouses, as well as Cowslips."<sup>20</sup> Even to their taste in wildflowers, the Bootts were anglophiles.

One son, Francis, reminisced years later on his father's devotion to gardening:

He was often in his Garden and about his frames by four o'clock, and I love to believe that my fondness for plants was caught from him. . . . [His garden] had no ostentation about it, and the familiar "weeds" . . . were his delight. His roses, stocks, Persian Iris, and Lily of the Valley were the pride of his Garden, as the Heath and Geraniums were of his greenhouse. His salads and cucumbers were the height of his pride as a vegetable grower. . . .<sup>21</sup>

These accounts are all that is known of Kirk Boott's garden. But a hundred "Rose-trees"! They must have occupied most of the garden, with spring bulbs and annuals tucked in around them. The annuals Boott grew had been introduced into America before or soon after the Revolution. All appear on the plant lists of such noted American gardeners as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. They, too, grew lavateras, or tree mallows, and everlastings (xeranthemums and coxcombs), which hold their color when dried.<sup>22</sup> As for Boott's roses, most were many-petalled centifolias and damasks, or small-flowered

varieties such as the fragrant Scotch (*Rosa spinosissima*). The pompon rose 'de Meaux'—a small, pink cabbage rose painted by Redouté—was probably one of Boott's newest varieties, having made its first English appearance at Kew Gardens in 1789.

Boott's greenhouse skills are apparent from his successes: bulbs forced into midwinter bloom, and roses in December. The Palma-Christi he mentioned was the tropical castor-bean tree, *Ricinus communis*, grown for its foliage. Greenhouse geraniums—actually, pelargoniums—were imported from southern Africa after 1750.

The greenhouse itself was a long lean-to, its roof only partially glazed. Heat was supplied by a wood fire, the smoke of which was conducted through a horizontal brick flue past the growing benches, to a chimney at the far end. Theodore Lyman's first greenhouse, one of the oldest survivors in this country and probably built not long before Boott's, can still be examined at The Vale in suburban Waltham, Massachusetts. Boott was doubtless inspired by Lyman's example. Gardiner Greene, a friend and neighbor of Boott's, had what may have been the first greenhouse in Boston. Kirk Boott had also seen glasshouses in England in his youth. While helping his brother find horticultural employment in 1783, Kirk has written that "amongst professional gardeners no place is esteemed a good one without Hot House and Green House."<sup>23</sup> The technology of horticulture was further advanced in England than in the United States, but by 1800 greenhouses were not uncommon appurtenances on the estates of prosperous New England gentlemen.

Bernard M'Mahon published the first edition of *The American Gardener's Calendar* in 1806. He explained the differences in construction and in use between a greenhouse and a hothouse. The former has only enough artificial heat to "keep off frost and dispel damps," while the latter has an inside stove and more glass.<sup>24</sup> The flowers that Boott grew would suggest that his was actually a hot-



*The earliest greenhouse at "The Vale," Theodore Lyman's estate in Waltham, Massachusetts, probably dating from 1804. This photograph shows the firebox and the horizontal flue for heating. Kirk Boott's greenhouse probably was quite similar. Courtesy of The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.*

house. Always a little homesick for England, loathing the long New England winters, Boott created his own artificial climate.

Kirk Boott and his wife made their long-delayed American sightseeing trip in 1812. They were particularly enthralled by the scenery of the Hudson River valley. The fields of wild buttercups observed from the boat reminded Kirk of "the dear and delightful meadows of England," the highest praise he could bestow.<sup>25</sup>

Kirk died in 1817. He left his wife, who survived him by forty years, four daughters, and five sons.

### **The Sons of Kirk Boott**

Kirk Boott and his wife set a family pattern when they enrolled their two oldest sons in

English schools in 1799. When he returned to Boston in 1805, Wright, the oldest, distressed his father by refusing to go to college. Kirk, Jr., and his next-younger brother, Francis, did attend Harvard, which their father considered the best place for them to receive an American education. Neither one was happy there. Francis graduated in 1810, but Kirk, Jr., left without a degree. All three brothers took a turn helping in the family store, but only Wright stayed on to become a partner.

Wright Boott developed an enthusiasm for exploring New England and beyond. In 1806, when he was seventeen, he journeyed by carriage into New Hampshire and Vermont, jolting over log roads, through mud, rocks, snow, and unending forests. "God deliver me from such a country," he wrote.<sup>26</sup> But two years later he and a cousin set off on a longer trip, to Niagara Falls, Montreal, and Quebec.

Wright's travels developed a focus after his brother Francis returned to Boston in 1814. After four years of study in England, Francis had devoted himself to science, particularly botany. Back in Boston, he became interested in collecting New England plants. Dr. Jacob Bigelow, a young professor of medicine at Harvard, shared his interests. Botany and medicine were viewed as closely related sciences. Bigelow asked Francis Boott to help him prepare a comprehensive work on the flora of New England.<sup>27</sup> To that end, Bigelow, Francis Boott, and three others explored and collected plants in the mountains of Massachusetts and New Hampshire in the summer of 1816. On the summit of Mount Washington, the men left their names in a bottle. Their names have been more permanently tagged to certain topographic features of the mountain—Boott Spur and Bigelow's Lawn. Francis brought his brother Wright to Mount Washington the following month, and Wright himself returned on several botanical and birding expeditions. In 1829, Wright discovered an unknown alpine plant that was later named for him: *Prenanthes boottii*, rattlesnake root.<sup>28</sup>

Francis Boott returned to England in 1820, remaining there for the rest of his life. He studied medicine, earning his M.D. at Edinburgh in 1825, and practiced in London. In 1819, he was made a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London. Later, he served as Secretary of the Society, where his portrait now hangs. In 1858, he published the first of four parts of a major botanical work on sedges—the genus *Carex*—for which he is still known. Harvard honored Francis Boott in 1834 by offering him the Professorship of Natural History, but Boott felt he could not accept, since he knew only botany, and not other, related disciplines such as horticulture and zoology.<sup>29</sup> Francis Boott gave his herbarium of White Mountain plants to Sir William Jackson Hooker, the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Hooker named a goldenrod after Francis Boott, whose name is attached to a sedge, and to an Asiatic water plant, *Boottia cordata*.

Having introduced Wright to botanical exploration and study, Francis went on to inspire their younger brothers James and William to follow suit. William studied medicine in Paris and Dublin and gained a reputation as a botanist himself. After Francis died, William continued to work on sedges. Boott's shield fern, *Dryopteris boottii*, was named for William.

Of the five brothers, only Kirk, Jr., had little active interest in plants. Instead, he devoted his life to another form of growth, that of the Industrial Revolution in America. As agent and treasurer of a newly formed textile corporation, Merrimack Manufacturing Company, he acted as organizer, overseer, and resident autocrat during the building of the mills, the canals, the housing, and the entire urban fabric of Lowell, Massachusetts, this country's first planned industrial city. The white-columned Greek Revival mansion he built there for himself and his family was surrounded by a garden of fruit and flowers.

Wright, James, William, and Francis were elected to membership in the Boston Society



*Dr. Francis Boott of London, noted physician and botanist. Photograph courtesy of Bradley R. Parker.*

of Natural History soon after its founding in 1830. Members of the Society were all proud amateurs in the days before professionalism tarnished the amateur image. They were committed to the expansion of knowledge for its own sake. As the forerunner of Boston's Museum of Science, the Society undertook to educate not only its members, but the general public as well.<sup>30</sup>

Wright Boott, and later his brother William, joined another important new organization for sharing and spreading knowledge, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, established in 1829. Both the Horticultural and the Natural History societies drew their members from the Boston intelligentsia and included many of the Bootts's neighbors, friends, and business associates.

Within two years of its inception the Horticultural Society held annual shows at which members exhibited fruit, flowers, and

greenhouse plants. At the 1834 exhibit, in Faneuil Hall, along with Joseph Coolidge's pears and Judge Lowell's orange trees, were three tropical plants from the collection of J. Wright Boott, Esq.: *Plumbago capensis*, a blue-flowered leadwort from southern Africa; *Begonia discolor*, a red-foliaged import from Asia with fragrant pink flowers; and, lastly, a white-flowered member of the Amaryllis Family, *Pancratium*, described at the time as being very beautiful.<sup>31</sup>

After the 1834 show, Wright withdrew from the Horticultural Society. He never exhibited his plants again. Someone must have offended him inadvertently. He had become a moody, difficult man of marked peculiarity.<sup>32</sup> His sister-in-law, Mrs. Kirk Boott, Jr., was the only Boott to enter a subsequent Horticultural Society show. According to the Society's 1837 *Transactions* (page 42), she submitted a "curious Cucumber" eight feet long. "[I]ts form reminded many of a serpent."

After his father died in 1817, Wright began a gradual retreat from business and society. Eventually he stopped going out altogether, and he spoke to almost no one. His troubles apparently began, as troubles often do, with money and a will. Wright was the executor of his father's will and was responsible for supporting his mother in the family mansion, hers for her life. He was also obligated to support his minor siblings, as well as the orphaned children of a cousin. Furthermore, all of Wright's brothers and sisters were entitled to equal shares of the residue of the estate.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, even before division, the family fortune was not as large as Kirk's children had believed it to be. In a stagnant economy, the Bootts's grand lifestyle had drastically reduced the fortune from its peak at the century's start. Even by 1810, Kirk, Sr., had foreseen that "my property will be but little for each when it comes to be divided."<sup>34</sup>

Wright's brothers joined him in their late father's import business for a few years, hoping in vain to make a go of it. By 1822, all but Wright had withdrawn. In 1826, Wright in-

vested in an iron foundry started by two of his brothers-in-law. Before he pulled out of that disastrous enterprise, he had lost a good part of his own and his siblings's inheritance. They later reminded him of this with some frequency. From then on, despite efforts by Kirk to give him an important role in the Lowell textile industry, Wright never engaged in business again. He stayed at home with his mother, and worked with his plants.

Even though Wright Boott had resigned from the Horticultural Society, his rare tropical plants and his success at coaxing them into bloom caused his name to recur often in the Society's annals. In 1837, for example, it was noted that Boott's West Indian *Cactus triangularis* had blossomed and that he had imported the novel *Chorizema henchmanni*, an Australian evergreen with bright red flowers.<sup>35</sup> He became known for imported greenhouse plants, particularly orchids.

His plants came from England. The Atlantic Ocean was not too wide for the Bootts, brought up as they were in the import business and having maintained close ties with their English relatives. Wright himself travelled to England before he became a recluse. His brothers, particularly Francis, knew the leading English botanists and plantsmen and could easily have sent or brought plants to Wright in Boston.

At an 1874 meeting of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, Marshall P. Wilder, a former president of the organization and later its historian, reminisced about the "exquisite manner in which the amaryllis was formerly cultivated by J. W. Boott . . . who received from England bulbs of new and rare varieties worth two or three guineas each."<sup>36</sup> Wilder also remembered Boott's as the *only* orchid collection in the country in the early 1830s. "They were cultivated in an ordinary greenhouse, occasionally closing a door for temperature control, and grew without piling up bricks and charcoal about the stem." In his article on horticulture in Winsor's 1881 *History of Boston*, Wilder wrote that some of



Wright's choicest plants had been obtained by his brother Francis from the Duke of Bedford.<sup>37</sup> The Sixth Duke of Bedford, proprietor of Woburn Abbey and an avid naturalist and botanist, owned the Covent Garden Market, on which he built two unique rooftop conservatories in 1827 where plants were grown, shown, and sold in a stylish setting.<sup>38</sup>

Orchids became a refined passion for many gardeners as the Nineteenth Century progressed, and orchid hunters began stripping them from their native habitats to meet the demand. Appalling numbers of plants gathered in the wild succumbed to the treatment they received from unwitting gardeners who had no idea how to care for them. In 1790 there were only fifteen species at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, but by 1812 Lodiges's Nursery near London was propagating orchids for sale.<sup>39</sup>

The orchid craze came later to the United States. In 1818, Harvard's Botanic Garden listed only one orchid, *Phaius grandifolius*, or *Bletia tankervilleæ*, a terrestrial orchid. The plant explorer John Fothergill had first brought *Phaius grandifolius* to England from the Far East in 1778. This may have been Wright Boott's first orchid, according to accounts by Wilder and another Horticultural Society member, Edward S. Rand, Jr.<sup>40</sup>

The epiphytic orchids were more difficult to grow than the terrestrial, but Wright Boott apparently learned to give them the necessary light and air. His collection included *Dendrobium* orchids from Asia, *Oncidium* orchids from Central America, and, from Brazil, the *Cattleya* orchids, whose large blooms of corolla fame are actually of the color now known as orchid.

Wright Boott's life ended in sadness and bitterness. His mother finally left the family home in 1836 to spend the remainder of her life in England with Francis and his family. Kirk, Jr., after years of trying to help Wright improve his own and the family fortunes, died suddenly in Lowell in 1837. James made a permanent move to England a year later.

William, who had always been close to Wright and had helped him in the greenhouse, left after Wright threatened him and drove him from the house. On the other hand, one sister, Mary Boott Lyman, newly widowed and in straitened circumstances, moved into the family house in 1844, as she felt she was legally entitled to do. She lived there for an entire year, reportedly without ever sharing a meal with Wright, or indeed even speaking to him—all according to conditions outlined by Wright before she moved in. Two young nephews also lived in the house for a time—in idleness, according to their aunt, who wrote Francis that the young men rose at noon and lounged about for hours, continually smoking cigars.<sup>41</sup>

The family, not surprisingly, became sharply divided. Those in England, including Mrs. Boott, could only feel sorry for Wright. Removed as they were, their image of him was blurred by fondness for the man he once had been. Francis wrote in 1843 to his friend Asa Gray, newly arrived in Cambridge to direct the Harvard Botanic Garden, that he hoped Gray would call at the Boott family's Bowdoin Square mansion. Francis was sure Wright would be pleased to show Gray his greenhouse and his plants.<sup>42</sup> In fact, it is unlikely that Gray would have been cordially received. Most of those who had to deal with Wright became convinced that he was insane.

The atmosphere of the Boott establishment must have been distinctly unsettling. One sister, Eliza Brooks, described an 1842 visit to Wright. She looked for him in the house and then in the garden, but "the plants were so high I did not see him." Eventually she discovered him "picking dead leaves off a plant."

"Your dahlias are very fine," she said.

He, saying nothing, retreated amongst the dahlias while she walked along the gravel path. "I could see Wright watching me through the high plants," she wrote.<sup>43</sup>

In 1845, Wright shot himself. His suicide unleashed a long and tiresome battle, waged

in public and in endless print, between his brother-in-law, Edward Brooks, and his executor, John Amory Lowell. Lowell reportedly blamed Brooks for hounding Wright to his death, to which rumor Brooks reacted by accusing Lowell of trying to influence Wright to change his will. Both men claimed their only interests were to clear their own good names and to see that justice was done in the matter of inheritance.<sup>44</sup>

After obtaining his mother's consent, Wright had sold the mansion just three months before he died.<sup>45</sup> The bricks in one wall were incorporated into Revere House, a grand, new hotel soon erected on the site, but the Boott house, greenhouse, and garden vanished entirely.

Under Wright's will, his precious plants were left to John Amory Lowell, a third-generation Boston horticulturist, who tended his collection at the family estate in Roxbury. Lowell exhibited some of the plants at Horticultural Society shows. One year he entered a *Dendrobium* orchid, formerly Boott's, which was four feet high and three feet in diameter, covered with drooping racemes of fragrant yellow flowers. In 1853, Lowell sold his *Oncidium* orchids to the Misses Pratt of Watertown, but most of his orchids went to Edward S. Rand of Dedham, whose collection was said to be the finest in the country.<sup>46</sup> In 1876 Rand's son still owned the huge *Dendrobium* which had belonged to Boott, as well as a *Cattleya crispa*, "as large as a small wash-tub."

When the Rand estate was sold, most of the best plants were given to Harvard. Asa Gray himself divided Wright's venerable *Dendrobium* and kept half for Harvard's Botanic Garden. Probably the scattered offspring of Boott's orchids are delighting their growers today. In the end, *they* were his legacy.

#### Endnotes

Twelve volumes of letters of Kirk Boott, Sr., are on microfilm at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Most of the letters were written by Kirk Boott, Sr., to his sister in Derby, England, but a number are by Wright

Boott. The letters were collected by Dr. Francis Boott, who added his own notes and comments in 1846.

Francis Boott's letters to Jacob Bigelow are in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, while his letters to Asa Gray are in the Library of the Gray Herbarium, Harvard University Herbaria, Cambridge.

The records of the Boston Society of Natural History are at the Boston Museum of Science.

1. Kirk Boott to his mother, 3 June and 4 July 1784, Letters of Kirk Boott, Sr., Massachusetts Historical Society (Microfilm Reel 1, Volume 3).
2. Note by Francis Boott, *ibid.*, Reel 1, Volume 1, page 68.
3. John Boott to his mother, *ibid.*, 5 July 1783, Reel 1, Volume 1.
4. Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, January 1783, *ibid.*, Reel 1, Volume 1.
5. Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, February 1783, *ibid.*, Reel 1, Volume 1.
6. Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 13 June 1783, *ibid.*, Reel 1, Volume 2.
7. Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 13 June 1804, *ibid.*, Reel 2, Volume 2.
8. Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, *ibid.*, 22 July 1795, Reel 1, Volume 6.
9. *Ibid.*, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 7 January 1799, Reel 1, Volume 6.
10. *Ibid.*, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 17 November 1802, Reel 2, Volume 1.
11. *Suffolk County Deeds*, Boston, Massachusetts, Volume 185, page 82, and Volume 208, page 90.
12. *Bulfinch's Boston, 1787-1817*, by Harold Kirker and James Kirker, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, page 80.
13. Massachusetts Historical Society, J. W. Boott to Eliza Boott, 30 September 1805, Reel 2, Volume 2.
14. *Ibid.*, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 13 June 1804, Reel 2, Volume 2.
15. *Ibid.*, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 30 October 1787, Reel 1, Volume 4.
16. *Ibid.*, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 22 July 1795, Reel 1, Volume 6.
17. *Ibid.*, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 16 December 1805, Reel 2, Volume 2.
18. *Ibid.*, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 15 April 1806, Reel 2, Volume 2.
19. *Ibid.*, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 10 June 1809, Reel 2, Volume 3.
20. *Ibid.*, J. W. B. to Eliza Boott, 16 May 1807, Reel 2, Volume 3.
21. *Ibid.*, note by Francis Boott, Reel 2, Volume 3, Page 102.
22. *Thomas Jefferson's Flower Garden at Monticello*, by Edwin M. Betts and Hazlehurst B. Perkins, Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1971, pages 54 to 58; *The Mount Vernon Gardens*,

- Robert B. Fisher, Mount Vernon, Virginia: The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1960, pages 16 to 24.
23. Massachusetts Historical Society, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, February 1783, Reel 1, Volume 1.
  24. *The American Gardener's Calendar*, Seventh Edition, by Bernard M'Mahon, Philadelphia: A. M'Mahon, 1828, page 86.
  25. Massachusetts Historical Society, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 28 September 1812, Reel 2, Volume 5.
  26. *Ibid.*, J. W. B. to Eliza Boott, 16 April 1806, Reel 2, Volume 2.
  27. Francis Boott to Jacob Bigelow, 25 June 1817; letters of Francis Boott, Countway Library, Harvard Medical School.
  28. Sedges and a spur, by George E. Gifford, Jr. *Harvard Medical Alumni Bulletin*, Volume 42 (Winter 1968), pages 23 to 26.
  29. Botanical necrology for the year 1863, by Asa Gray. *The American Journal of Science and the Arts*, Second Series, Volume 73, page 289 (May 1864).
  30. See "The Nineteenth-Century Amateur Tradition: The Case of the Boston Society of Natural History," by Sally G. Kohlstedt, pages 173 to 187 in *Science and Its Public*, edited by Gerald Holton and William A. Blanspied. Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1976.
  31. Massachusetts Horticultural Society, *Transactions*, 1834, page 23.
  32. Wright's sister-in-law, Mrs. Kirk Boott, Jr., was the only Boott to enter a subsequent Horticultural Society show. According to the Society's 1837 *Transactions* (page 42), she submitted a "curious Cucumber" eight feet long. "[I]ts form reminded many of a serpent."
  33. *A Correspondence between Edward Brooks and John A. Lowell*. Boston: S. N. Dickinson, 1847, *passim*.
  34. Massachusetts Historical Society, Kirk Boott to Eliza Boott, 1819, Reel 2, Volume 4.
  35. Massachusetts Horticultural Society, *Transactions*, 1837-8, pages 23 and 27.
  36. *Ibid.*, 1874, Part 1, pages 25 and 34.
  37. *The Memorial History of Boston, including Suffolk County, Massachusetts. 1630-1880*. Four volumes Boston: J. R. Osgood and Company, 1881-1883. Volume 4, page 612.
  38. *The Glass House*, by John Hix. Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1974. Pages 92 to 93.
  39. Kew and orchidology, by Gordon P. DeWolf, Jr. *American Orchid Society Bulletin* (December 1959), Volume 28, pages 877 to 880.
  40. Massachusetts Horticultural Society, *Transactions*, 1874, page 34.
  41. *Correspondence between Brooks and Lowell*, page 115.
  42. Francis Boott to Asa Gray, 1 May 1843. Francis Boott letters, Harvard University Herbaria.
  43. *Correspondence between Brooks and Lowell*, page 113.
  44. *Ibid.*, *An Answer to the Pamphlet of Mr. John A. Lowell*, by Edward Brooks. Boston: Eastburn's Press, 1851.
  45. *Suffolk County Deeds*, Volume 544, page 78.
  46. *Orchids*, by Edward Sprague Rand, Jr. New York, 1876. Pages 131 to 136.

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