

The pineapple as a symbol of Virginia hospitality

Two large stone pineapples on brick pedestals guard the driveway of a house facing the town's golf course on Palmer Drive in Blacksburg.

You can readily see them for yourself using Google street view.

Driving past them regularly serves as a reminder to

this columnist of the historical role of the pineapple as a Virginia symbol of hospitality.

It was a role he first learned of during a 1976 tour of the Shirley Plantation along the James River in Tidewater.

According to the Shirley Plantation website, it began

with a 1613 royal land grant, which became the location of Virginia's first plantation, owned by the Hill family until 1723.

That year Elizabeth Hill married John Carter, eldest son of Robert "King" Carter. Today the National Historic Landmark plantation house is a private family home open to paying visitors that remains surrounded by a working plantation.

It was a member of the family who gave my wife and me our tour and called our attention to all the pineapples.

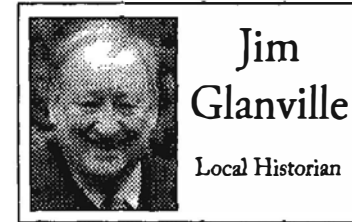
The plantation house that dates from about 1738 has a pineapple on its roof, while inside doorways feature carved pineapple woodwork, and there are carved pineapple replicas on the stair balustrade.

Apparently Christopher Columbus was the first European to encounter the pineapple. During his second ocean crossing in 1493 his ships anchored at the Caribbean volcanic island now called Guadeloupe and his landing party found a fruit that Columbus noted in his log (it is said) as tasting like an apple and looking like a pine cone.

The pineapple originated in inland South America, but by the time Columbus arrived had been widely planted throughout the Caribbean islands and Central America, probably spread by the highly skilled Canb sailors.

Pinecones have been objects of veneration throughout recorded history. Dionysus, the Greek god of the wine and merriment, is often depicted as carrying a staff tipped with a pinecone.

A 10-foot high Roman bronze pine



Jim Glanville

Local Historian

cone from the 1st or 2nd century that was once a fountain stands today near the Vatican.

Images of the Mayan god "Seven Snakes" depict the deity offering pinecones, and the pinecone is a common symbol shown on images of Hindu gods.

So it seems likely that from its earliest introduction to Europe by the Spanish, the mere shape of the pineapple destined it to play a special symbolic role.

In Virginia, pineapple idolization is very much associated with Colonial Williamsburg. By the 1930s, in the recreated Colonial Williamsburg, the pineapple was well established as a design element in its architecture, ceramics, and art. Fresh pineapples serve as the centerpiece for many of the creative decorations for which Williamsburg is known today.

Virginia pineapple frenzy probably began in the early 18th century when ships from the James River plantations began a regular and growing trade with the Caribbean. In 1730, William Byrd ordered a carved door-surround from London featuring a pineapple. Across the river at the contemporary Brandon Plantation of father and son Nathaniel Harrison a pineapple adorns its pyramidal roof.

The most amazing Virginia pineapple symbol of all is not in Virginia but in Scotland.

Lord John Murray, the 4th Earl of Dunmore and 4th Viscount of Fincastle is usually called by historians simply Dunmore. Dunmore was the last British Governor of the Virginia colony from 1771-1775 when he fled Williamsburg to a ship on the York River and was replaced by Patrick Henry as the first Governor of the State of Virginia.

Dunmore had a pineapple passion. He built a steam-heated 40-foot stone pineapple at his ancestral home at the royal village of Airth in the traditional Scottish county of Stirlingshire. The history of this stone pineapple, appropriately called Dunmore's folly, is obscure, but it was probably built after Dunmore's return to Scotland from Virginia in 1776. The steam also fed a nearby hot house where pineapples could be cultivated.

In modern times, the Airth property has been acquired by the National Trust for Scotland, and it is possible for members of the public to rent a summertime room in the pineapple.

The next time you are near the Blacksburg golf course look out for the pineapples and consider the long history that they embody. And, yes, Dunmore gives Fincastle County its name.

Jim Glanville is a retired chemist living in Blacksburg. He has been publishing and lecturing for more than a decade about the history of southwest Virginia.



Image: Google Street View