

Tomatoes have Reynoldsburg roots

By **Eastside Messenger** - July 10, 2008



Messenger photo by Linda Dillman

The Livingston homestead, located at 1792 Graham oad, holds a piece of Reynoldsburg history.

Hundreds of years ago, the backbone of Italian culinary dishes was thought by the British to be a poisonous fruit, but for Alexander Livingston, the tomato proved to be a red carpet to horticultural fame.

Born in Reynoldsburg in 1821, Livingston modernized the tomato from a small, sour-tasting fruit, to a larger, sweeter product with growth consistency and the capability to withstand processing on a large scale. The Paragon variety was the first tomato uniform in flesh, size, and flavor introduced in America in 1870. Five years later, he introduced the Acme tomato, having again met his goal of growing tomatoes "smooth in contour, uniform in size, and better flavored."

First encounter

Livingston discovered his first wild tomato in 1832.

"I was 10-years-old and was running down one of those old-fashioned lanes on either side of which was the high rail fence, then so familiar to all Ohio people," Livingston wrote in "Livingston and the Tomato," first published by his Columbus seed company in the late 1800s. "Its rosy cheeks lightened up one of these fence corners, and arrested my youthful attention. I quickly gathered a few of them in my hands and took them to my mother. As soon as she saw me with them, she cried out, 'You must not eat them, my child. They must be poison; for even the hogs will not eat them...You may go and put them on the mantel. They are only fit to be seen for their beauty.' This I did, adding purple and yellow ones to the red one, and soon had quite a collection on display. The wild tomatoes bore small, hollow, tough, sour, watery fruit. From that early date, the tomato became an object of special interest to me. Little did I then think, or for many years afterwards, that it was destined to make my name famous among seedsmen, market gardeners, canners, and horticulturalists the world over."

An interest in the natural world

The developer of the modern tomato grew up on the family farm and was exposed to limited schooling. His mother passed away when Livingston was 17 and he worked for a gardener for eight dollars a month when he turned 21. Despite an abbreviated education, as a young man he showed a strong interest in the natural world and was a keen observer of plants and insects.

His tenure as a gardener laid the foundation for his future foray into horticulture, which he parlayed into a seed company that continues into the 21st century. When Livingston turned 23, he married Matilda Graham

and the family eventually grew to 10 children, the oldest of which died in infancy. A year later, the couple leased 113 acres of farmland, which included livestock, seed cultivation, and an area for testing and development of new fruit/vegetable varieties.

"As years passed by, reckless people began to eat them (wild tomatoes) and as it became generally known that they were not poisonous, they came into more general use," continued Livingston in his book as he described the years-long process of domesticating the tomato. "New and slightly improved kinds were soon put on the market, but all efforts in this line for years did not get anything other than rough, imperfect fruits."

Planting the seeds

In 1852, Livingston saved enough money to purchase 50 acres of land. The seed grower he worked for, Robert Robertson, moved to Iowa and Livingston bought 400 boxes of seed from him to sell on commission for the Buckeye Garden Seed Company in 1856. He quit farming and devoted his time to the garden seed business, which grew steadily to 4,000 boxes in 1877.

"In passing over my fields of growing tomatoes, which were still of all sizes, sorts, and shapes, my attention was attracted to a tomato plant having distinct characteristics and bearing heavy foliage. It was unlike any other in the field or that I had ever seen," recalled Livingston in his book. "As I examined it closely, observing how alike every tomato was on the stalk, wishing they were larger, and meditated over its possibilities long, it came to me like an inspiration, 'Why not select special tomato plants instead of specimen tomatoes?' At any rate, I acted at once on the idea. The seeds from the plant were with painstaking care and made the basis of future experiments."

The idea grows

The Livingston homestead, located at 1792 Graham Road, was built in 1864 and is a Reynoldsburg landmark. The site, now surrounded by homes, once housed fields, a seed processing operation, and a place to conduct horticultural research and experiments.

When the Buckeye Garden Seed Company fell victim to tough economic times in 1876-77 and went bankrupt, Livingston quit selling on commission and began selling directly to growers.

Under the direction of his sons, the A.W. Livingston's Sons company moved their operations to Columbus and the Reynoldsburg native journeyed to Des Moines, Iowa, in 1880 with the hopes of growing the seed business out west. Livingston eventually turned the Des Moines operation over to his son, Josiah, after Matilda passed away in 1890, and returned to Ohio since the Columbus business was so prosperous.

In 1898, the company was incorporated as the Livingston Seed Company, the same year the company founder passed away. Ironically, by the late 1930s, the seed industry began changing and the company dropped tomatoes from their line.

The United States Department of Agriculture, in their 1937 Yearbook of Agriculture, reported the work of the Livingston Seed Company resulted in the introduction of more new varieties than of any other private group and most of the varieties were of the Livingston's own finding or origination. The department said it was not out of place to call attention to the "great contribution of the Livingston Seed Company to tomato improvement" and of the 40 varieties attaining a distinct status prior to 1910, a third were from Livingston productions and introductions.

"It appears that half of the major varieties were due to the ability of the Livingstons to evaluate and perpetuate superior material in the tomato," continued the annual publication.

According to the Victory Seed Company, in 1947 the last Livingston Seed Company wholesale catalog was printed and in 1979, great-grandson Alan Livingston sold the business operation to Forest Randolph, who operated it as Superior Seed Company. Today, the wholesale-only packet seed company, whose product is sold in retail stores under the Livingston Seed Company banner, is operated by Robert Johnston.

"By good cultivation and wise selection from season to season," Livingston wrote in his book, "not to exceed five years, it (the Paragon variety) took on flesh, size, and improved qualities. I then put it on the general market. This was in 1870...it is today (1890s-era) the same distinct variety which it was at the first. On account of its superior excellence in comparison with all others in the market at that time, I called it the Paragon tomato."

"Home of the Tomato"

In 1965, the Franklin County Historical Society designated Reynoldsburg as "The Home of the Tomato." The 43rd annual Tomato Festival will be held in Civic Park on Sept. 3-7.

For information, visit www.reynoldsburgtomatofestival.org.

(Information courtesy of "Livingston and the Tomato" by A.W. Livingston with a forward and appendix by Andrew F. Smith, Victory Seed Company, and the Reynoldsburg/Truro Historical Society.)
