

Master Gardener Project Makes Discovery Commemorating the Remarkable Life of Jane Gates

By Sherry Frick

The Jane Gates Heritage House located on Greene Street in Cumberland, Maryland is a non-profit museum and community center started by John and Sukh Gates to honor the spirit of John's third great-grandmother, Jane Gates (c. 1819 – 1888). Jane lived most of her life enslaved, most likely in or near Cumberland. She obtained freedom when slavery was abolished in Maryland in November 1864. Jane purchased the house and lot for \$1400 in 1871 in the current location of 515, 511, and 509 Greene Street. Jane Gates is listed in the 1870 U.S. Census in the house at 515 Greene Street as a nurse and a laundress, age 51, living with two of her children and two grandchildren. The house at 515 is Jane's original house. The houses at 511 and 509 were built decades later by one of Jane's daughters and a granddaughter. Jane Gates is also the second great-grandmother of Dr. Paul Gates and his brother Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a scholar of African American culture at Harvard University and host of the PBS program, "Finding Your Roots." Jane's house is featured in his PBS documentary, "African American Lives II."

The mission of the Jane Gates Heritage House is to empower, enrich, and enhance the lives of all through faith, education, and history. Along with African American history, the President of the board of directors, Sukh Gates, is passionate about teaching elementary-aged children crucial life skills such as growing and preparing food and healthy living. To reach this goal, Sukh wanted to transform the backyard of the house into a teaching garden. She asked for help from the Master Gardeners in Allegany County to design and install the garden. Sherry Frick, Allegany County Master Gardener Coordinator, developed a plan based on Sukh's goals and the available land at the house. The plan called for four raised beds for vegetables, a small bed for fruit along an existing wall, and a pollinator garden along the fence that borders the alley.

The Jane Gates Heritage House received a grant from the Maryland Commission on African American History and Culture to renovate the house but not the grounds. Gates and Frick applied for a grant from the Allegany Work Group of the Western Maryland Food Council to build the raised beds. In March 2020, the Food Council awarded \$600 to cover the cost of materials and soil. Josh Frick, Sherry's husband, constructed the raised beds on site. The Gates and Frick families then worked together to install the raised beds and fill them with soil. In June, Master Gardeners donated and planted fruit, vegetables, herbs, and flowers in the gardens. The local wildlife posed quite a challenge, prompting the Gates family to erect a fence to protect their fledgling garden. By mid-July, Gates excitedly picked the first zucchini.

This project fostered a growing friendship between Gates and Frick and their respective organizations. Frick regularly consulted with Gates over the summer and into the fall. Gates, new to gardening, was amazed by the beauty, the challenges and the serenity afforded by the garden. In the course of inspecting the pollinator garden for weeds, Frick noticed a plant that she hadn't paid much attention to before. This plant looked familiar, like a flower of some kind, but it had not been planted by Master Gardeners. It was a volunteer that had re-seeded and spread itself from times past. It grew along the alley behind the house. Frick pondered this a while, and it finally came to her. This plant is soapwort!

Soapwort, whose botanical name is *Sopanaria officinalis*, may be more familiar to you as bouncing Bet or wild sweet William. European colonists brought soapwort to America because it had several essential uses. Sap from the roots and stems can be combined with water to create a lathery soap solution traditionally used to clean delicate textiles and woolen fabrics. This plant naturalized throughout North America. Adding to this curiosity, bouncing Bet (Bet is short for Bess) is an old English nickname that means washerwoman.

Finding this plant was intriguing because it gave us more knowledge into Jane's life as a laundress. An archeological dig in 2019 led by Oxbow Cultural Research principal Suzanne Smith found remnants of burned wood behind the house, near to where the soapwort grows. The wood was in the ground at an angle, which may indicate Jane used a tripod to hold a large kettle over a fire. In the 1800s, the boiling of textiles in a large kettle was part of the laundering regimen. Could Jane have planted the soapwort because she used it as part of her cleaning process? We can't know for sure, but it's fascinating to consider.

This discovery prompted Gates and Frick to learn more about 19th Century laundering techniques. The more they delved into history, the more Jane Gates came alive. Jane's probable daily routines, methods, and challenges became clearer. Suddenly the life of Jane Gates became tangible. This is the mission of the Jane Gates Heritage House, after all, to learn from Jane by connecting the past to the present. The providential discovery of this inconspicuous plant has shed light on this remarkable woman, Jane Gates, and for that we are grateful.