

The abandoned attempt to establish a botanic garden in Colombo, 1799

by

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Abstract

Sri Lanka chronicles and other historical sources indicate the existence of a few types of gardens in Sri Lanka. However, the concept of modern botanic gardens was introduced by the British during their occupation of the country.

Based on published sources, it has been proposed that a botanic garden was established in 1799 by the British in Colombo under the orders of Frederic North (1798-1805 CE), the first British Governor of the Maritime Provinces of the country. This is based on the fact that Joseph Jonville was appointed as the Superintendent of Botanic Gardens, and was ordered to establish a botanic garden in a land called Ortafoula in Peliyagoda, near Colombo. This reference has been cited by many subsequent authors as a source for the establishment of a botanic garden at this location.

With contemporary evidence, this study concludes that the botanic garden ordered by Governor North to be established was never established. The land was in Peliyagoda, on the right bank of the Kelani River, and after an examination of the proposed site, and discussions with the locals, Jonville proposed to abandon the project due to the threat of frequent inundation of the land during the rainy season.

There are references to botanic gardens in Sri Lankan chronicles and other sources, suggesting that there was a tradition of gardens since the early history of the country. These sources suggest that at least a few types of gardens existed.

Bandaranayake identified royal and monastic gardens as two types of gardens mentioned in the early and middle historical period according to the chronicles of Sri Lanka.¹ He further described that Sri Lankans inherited and developed these two concepts of the early Indian tradition; first being the urban and suburban park or grove where kings, nobles and merchants as well as ascetics took refuge from the heat and dust of the cities and the second being the distant forest grove or mountain or cave retreat, which ascetics and sages frequented.²

Meanwhile, Dissanayaka divided the royal gardens into two sub categories; royal palace gardens (*grhodyāna*) which were the gardens attached to the palace and probably encircled with a wall and the royal pleasure gardens (*maṅgala udyāna*) which were larger gardens situated separately from the palace with more diversity of garden elements, more facilities and aesthetic beauty.³ Dissanayaka argued that it is difficult to believe that the idea of royal garden development was not so developed in early pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka.⁴ In addition, he identified instances where gardens or parks were built for the use of the public.⁵ Meanwhile taking the available evidence and studying the continuing practice today, de Silva stated that it is possible to identify four types of gardens; royal gardens, urban gardens, monastic gardens and home gardens.⁶

There are numerous royal gardens established in Sri Lanka in the ancient times. The earliest garden to be mentioned is the garden attached to the palace of King Paṇḍukābhaya, mentioned in the chronicles⁷ and Dissanayaka suggested that it was a palace garden located in the inner city.⁸ Mahāmeghavana garden in Anuradhapura was established by King Muṭasiva⁹ and has been identified as a royal garden situated outside the inner city, and another garden was there in the city by the name of Nandana by the time of King Devānampiyatissa. Ranmasu Uyana was in existence by the 2nd century BCE¹⁰, and Sīgiriya was built by King Kāśyapa during the 5th Century CE. Nandana Uyana and Deepa Uyana were built by King Parākramabāhu in Polonnaruva.¹¹ Dissanayaka mentioned of Robert Knox's description of the Royal

garden at Hanguranketa, which was in existence in the 17th century during the Kandy Period.¹² Several monastic gardens are found in monasteries around the country and de Silva identified Mihintale, Kaludiya [Pokuṇa], Rajagirilena Kanda, Vessagiriya, Western Monasteries in Anuradhapura, Riṭigala, Arankele, Pabbata Vihāra etc. are among some of the earliest monastic gardens in Sri Lanka.¹³

Most of these were not public gardens. Dissanayake provided evidence for gardens which were common for the general public too.¹⁴ He suggested that King Devānampiyatissa ordered the city dwellers to engage in water sports, and he went on deer hunting on the Poson Poya day to Mihintale, and this suggests that the water sports might have been performed in a garden and not in tanks or reservoirs.¹⁵ He attributed the gardens and ponds repaired by King Parākramabāhu in Anuradhapura were for the use of general public as there was no royal adobe at Anuradhapura by the Polonnaruva Period.¹⁶ However, he mentioned that first direct evidence for the construction of a garden for the general public was during Polonnaruva period, and it was when King Parākramabāhu built gardens in Polonnaruva city for the pleasure of the city dwellers. The garden called Nandana was such a garden.¹⁷

Modern botanic gardens

The roots of botanic gardens as an institute are said to be traceable to ancient China and countries bordering Mesopotamia, where there were gardens which were centres for raising fruits, vegetables and herbs used in making the crude medicines of the time. These gardens come under the type garden in general, they may not be classified as botanic gardens under the modern definition, as these might have been the gardens of the palace or limited to some sectors of the society. A widely accepted definition of botanic gardens mentions that “botanic gardens are institutions holding documented collections of living plants for the purposes of scientific research, conservation, display and education”.¹⁸

The origin of modern botanic gardens took place in Europe, with Pisa (1545) and Padua (1545), considered as being the first two

botanic gardens, established in Italy in the mid-16th century.¹⁹ That type of gardens expanded into other European countries with the gardens in Leiden (1590), Oxford (1621) and Edinburgh (1670). Many of these gardens started as ‘physic gardens’, providing facilities to study and the identification of medical and poisonous plants and growing plants to produce necessary medicine. Hence these gardens were initially associated with the medical schools of universities. The curators had begun to acquire more plants to increase the attractiveness of the gardens and to demonstrate plant diversity.²⁰ With that, the use of the botanic gardens as a teaching and medicinal garden declined and converted to a garden of the plant culture and the display of ornamental plants and plant groups of interest. It is said that this change took place during the 18th and 19th centuries, when the science of botany took form and leading botanists took over the role of directors of botanic gardens.²¹ Thus the modern botanic gardens appear to have developed gradually.

When the British established a powerful empire, they went on to establish botanic gardens in their colonies. It should be noted that the issue of establishment of botanic gardens as an international enterprise related to the colonial period, especially as it relates to Sri Lanka, had been covered by Brockway²² and Goonatilake.²³

Evidence for the ‘First’ British Botanic Garden, 1799

It is suggested that there existed a botanic garden before the British occupation of the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka during the Dutch occupation in the 18th century. The source of this seems to be the account of Robert Percival who described Slave Island and mentioned “There is also an excellent house built by the Dutch, ... with a very pretty garden attached to it”.²⁴ Petch pointed that, the idea that the Dutch had a botanic garden on Slave Island area was based on Percival’s this account and, there was no evidence to show that this garden was a garden other than a usual bungalow garden.²⁵ A few paintings and a plan dated 1710 and depict another garden attached to the Dutch Governor’s House in Colombo.²⁶ Petch also mentioned the importance of omission of any reference

of a botanic garden in his account of Ceylon by C. P. Thunberg, the Swedish botanist who visited the Dutch held territories of Sri Lanka in 1777.²⁷

There were several bungalow gardens during the early British occupation. Cordiner mentioned that General Macdowall, had a garden in Colombo. Macdowall was able to make valuable collections of exotics, with his connections with Dr. Roxburgh of Culcutta Botanic Garden, which he left when he left for India. It is mentioned that he received “boxes of trees and shrubs from almost every ship and one acre and a half of ground was completely filled with them, ranged at proper distances, ...” and Cordiner listed some of such plants.²⁸ There were agricultural experiments carried out by certain individuals, often with exchanges of foreign plants. Persons were engaged in the exchanging plants, such as Gavin Hamilton, the Collector of Colombo, who is mentioned as given seeds of guinea grass (*Panicum maximum* or *Urochloa maxima*) to C. Schwallie in 1801 or 1802, to be planted in latters’ agricultural land near Negombo. This is the earliest known record of guinea grass in Sri Lanka.²⁹ There were several types of crops in his agricultural land. This shows that gardening and cultivation were undertaken by British as well as Dutch inhabitants.

The topic of this study, the evidence for the effort of establishing a botanic garden by the British in Colombo during the governorship of Frederic North (CE 1798-1805) is available in a few published accounts. T. Petch has summarised these records and also tried to identify the location of the site of this botanic garden, in an article written in 1920.³⁰ The earliest published reference of the establishment of such a botanic garden was to Emersen Tennent, who mentioned that “the first Botanic Garden in Ceylon was established by Mr. North, in 1799, in Ortafula, on the banks of the Kalany, at Colombo, and M. Joinville was named curator.” He further stated that “in 1810 it was transferred to a portion of Slave Island...”³¹ Although Tennent mentioned the name of the person responsible as M. Joinville, the person he refers to was Joseph Jonville, who held several important positions under the administration of Frederic North. The garden he mentioned

as Slave Island is another garden and it was actually established around 1812 on a proposal of Sir Joseph Banks in 1810 and in the present day Kew Road area in Slave Island.³²

Henry Trimen, the director of Royal Botanic Gardens Peradeniya, mentioned that "... the first English Governor, Hon. Fred. North, who possessed a garden attached to his villa at Peliyagoda, on the Kelani near Colombo made some attempt to give it a botanical character and appointed (in 1879) one Joseph Jonville, superintendent."³³ The year given in this document is a typographical error for 1799. This has been repeated by many authors, such as J.C. Willis in an article in 1901, who said "The first English Governor, the Hon. F. North (afterwards Lord Guilford) had a small private garden at Peliyagoda near Colombo, under the superintendence of Joseph Jonville or Joinville, whom he brought out as "Clerk for Natural History and Agriculture".³⁴

These two references suggest an important point that North had a villa or small private garden and the particular garden had a connection to that. Cordiner had mentioned of this villa and the events as "At Pilligory (sic) on the opposite side of the river, ..., the Honourable Frederic North built a temporary bungalow (sic) of wooden pillars roofed with cocoa-nut leaves, where he occasionally gave grand entertainments.³⁵ Ceylon Government Gazette once reported of an entertainment given by "Governor at his Cingalese Bungale of Palligorry (sic), on the banks of Callani (sic) Ganga".³⁶ Inappropriately Petch rejected the existence of such a villa or a bungalow.³⁷

T. Petch, who served in the Royal Botanic Gardens of Peradeniya, concluded in another article that the known facts point to the conclusion that no botanic garden existed before 1810.³⁸ Petch rejected the claim of the establishment of the botanic garden by North by pointing that Jonville's lengthy absences from Colombo leaving little time to manage a garden if he established such a one, lack of any record of North having a country residence near Kelani River, etc.³⁹ Hence it is mentioned as "Investigations of the available data relating to Botanic Gardens in Ceylon

indicate that no Botanic Garden existed before the year 1810. It is possible, however, that a thorough search of the Government Archives might produce data not available at present, and show that earlier establishments were created”, in the volume published for the centenary of the Royal Botanic Gardens of Peradeniya, in 1922.⁴⁰

Although it was concluded so in 1922, there were other authors who went on to repeat the story of the establishment of a garden during North’s time based on early references. For instance, the 1997-1998 edition of the Fergusons Directory mentioned that the first botanical garden was established by Governor North at Peliyagoda by the Kelani as Joseph Jonville as curator (misspelt as Joinville).⁴¹ Pethiyagoda mentioned about this as “It was only in 1799, three years after the British East Indies Company had evicted the Dutch from the Island, that the first British Governor, Frederick North, appointed Eudelin de Jonville, a mysterious but talented Frenchman of whose life almost nothing is known, as Superintendent of Cinnamon Gardens. De Jonville was additionally charged with tending the botanic garden abandoned by the Dutch at Peliyagoda, in the outskirts of Colombo. But the Frenchman’s contribution to Sri Lankan Gardening was not to last long: in 1801 he vanished from the record, leaving no trace.”⁴² Sivasundaram stated, “Given that the kings of Kandy kept their own gardens, it was fitting that the first Crown Governor, Frederick North, kept his own too, outside Colombo, under the charge of a Frenchman, Joseph Jonville ...”⁴³

Evidence for the aborted attempt

Written evidence is presented here from the sources at the Sri Lanka National Archives to prove that although there was an effort by Frederic North to establish a botanic garden, such a botanic garden was not established, and what Petch suggested was correct.⁴⁴

Joseph Jonville was appointed as the Superintendent of Botanic Gardens from 01.02.1799. The letter sent by William Boyd, the 1st Assistant Secretary to Government appointing

Jonville, on the instructions of the Governor, states that the “Governor having thought proper to appropriate the Garden at Ortafoulla for botanical purposes.” According to this letter, Jonville was to receive an allowance of fifty pagodas per mensem “payable out of the sum which the Hon’ble Company allow him [Governor] for the investigation of natural productions.”⁴⁵

In addition to the above position, Jonville was instructed by the Governor to “act without an additional pay” as the Overseer of Government Plantations on 04.02.1799. However, he was to receive 20 pagodas per month to maintain a palanquin and sixteen bearers, as he had to be always ready to visit plantations at the requisition of the government.⁴⁶ Plantations here referred to are the cinnamon plantations, which Jonville supervised during the subsequent years. His later communications with the state officials mention him as the Superintendent of Government Plantations or Superintendent of Cinnamon Plantations, until he was appointed the Surveyor General in August 1800.⁴⁷

Although Petch suspected whether there was no such garden established by Jonville, he did not produce tangible evidence for that. He did not present any substantial evidence for the non-establishment of the garden. The evidence that can prove such a garden was not established in Colombo is available among the diaries of Frederic North. A letter from Jonville, mentioned as the Superintendent of Government Plantations, and dated 13.03.1799, nearly six weeks after his appointment as the Superintendent of Botanic Gardens, provides sufficient evidence. Jonville mentioned that he himself followed the orders of North to cultivate the garden of Peligouri [Peliyagoda?] or Ortafoulla. Jonville stated as;

“Your Excellency having ordered me to cultivate the Garden of Peligouri or Ortafoulla, on purpose to make a Botanic Garden of it, I immediately employed myself in examining the quality of its soil; and made inquiry of the natives respecting the effects which are produced on it by the modifications of the athems (sic) here in every season of the year.

In first place I have observed that the earth is only clay, and that the part which is at present untilld, has been exhausted of every means of fertility, by a plantation of sugar cane, but it is not impossible to remedy this inconvenience, by mixing with this clay, some sand and plenty of demy.

2. I have learned of many of the country men, specially of Maha Modillar (sic) that, in the rainy season, this garden is in danger always to be overflowed 2 or 3 feet, no remedy is known to me against this evil, which would render fruitless every expence (sic) and trouble which might be employed on it.

I therefore, take the liberty to represent to your Excellency that it would be proper to abandon the project of making this place a botanic garden; and to look for another in the Marendan [Maradana], or some other situation near Colombo, being attentive to choose it sufficiently large to contain a collection of foreign and country plants, and also to make nurseries (sic), for cinnamon and various other trees that may be judged proper to propagate here.⁷⁴⁸

There are no other communications on this subject found among the numerous letters of Jonville written consequently. This suggests that the botanic garden was probably not established as North expected on this particular land. The Dutch name of the land Ortafula or Ortafoulla was in use before Jonville was ordered by Governor North to attempt to establish a garden and hence the name alone cannot be taken as evidence for the establishment of a botanic garden by Governor North.

More information of the location of this land plot is provided by another source, a minute by the Governor. The minute titled as “That the following Grant be issued” and found in a diary of Frederic North few weeks before he left the country at the end of his tenure in office in 1805 is on a land titled ‘Malwatte’ situated in ‘Peliyagodde’. The full minute entry is as follows;

“As I am desirous of giving a public testimony of the high sense which I entertain of the long and faithful services rendered to His Majesty’s Government by John De Saram Wijeseker Aberatne First Maha Modeliar of My Gate, I hereby grant him to hold for himself and his heirs the full and entire property of the inclosed (sic) garden called Malwatte situated at Pelliagodde, under the Adigarrepattoo of the Hina Corle, containing eight acres and 13 ¼ square poles as per annexed plan [not attached] together with the house construct thereon, the whole of which premises have been valued at the sum of Two Thousand and Seven Hundred Rix Dollars (Rix Ds 2700) and I do suspend all payments for the same till His Majesty’s pleasure is known.”⁴⁹

Malwatte (meaning ‘flower garden’) is the literal translation of the word Ortafula or Ortafoulla, in Dutch. The Dutch name is analogous to the name of the land in which Jonville was ordered to establish a botanic garden. If the two lands are the same, this provides more evidence for the fact that the garden was not established as recommended after the inquiries by Jonville. If any type of a garden was established and continued to exist in such a plot of land belonging to the government, the Governor might have not proposed it to be granted to a Modeliar.

This provides further clues for the probable site where Jonville was asked to establish the garden. The similarity of names Ortafula and Malwatta and the proximity to the river, it could be suggested that this place could be the so called bungalow site of Governor North at Peliyagoda. This is one of the four places Petch suggested for the botanic gardens or private gardens, but he did not come to a conclusion on the site, and he even rejected the existence of a residence of North there. Denham stated that there was an experimental station in Grandpass close to the Kelani River and known as Ortafula, which became Malwatta, the flower garden.⁵⁰ He may have been referring to the bungalow at Grandpass occupied by General Macdowall who was noted to have planted trees, as mentioned above.⁵¹ However, the contemporary documents of North’s time place the Ortafula land, where the attempt was made

to establish a botanic garden, in Peliyagoda village, on the other side of the river. There is a possibility of having more than one land plots called Ortafula or Malwatta and it is not an uncommon land name in the country, even today. That name can refer to a botanic garden, park, or a bungalow garden with flowers and trees.

In conclusion, it can be suggested with tangible contemporary evidence, that the botanic garden ordered by Governor North to be established near Colombo by appointing Joseph Jonville in 1799 as the Superintendent of Botanic Gardens, was not established. The land was situated in Peliyagoda on the right bank (northern side) of the Kelani river, and after an examination of the proposed site, Jonville proposed to abandon the proposal.

Endnotes

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