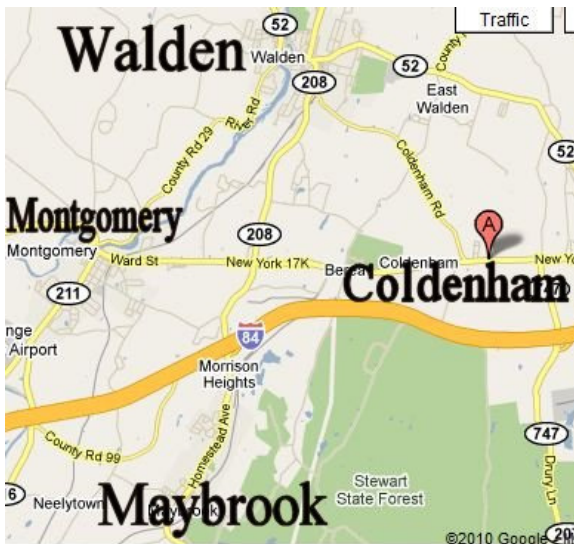


The Story of Jane Colden  
America's First Lady Botanist  
In the Town of Montgomery  
during the eighteenth century



Jane Colden 1724-1760



Cadwallader Colden brought his family here to live in a place he named Coldenham. Today, the name of this place is spelled without the g, simply Coldenham.

The year was 1727 and the Colden family members were among the first settlers to arrive here. Dr. Colden was a medical doctor and surveyor for the Province of New York. Very few roads existed in the 1700s so travel was difficult. Coldenham was located close to the Hudson River

The Colden family settled in their new home, knowing that there was much work to do.



Colonial families, like the Coldens, had to make everything they had, including their house, barns and tools.

They would burn peat and wood for warmth in the fireplace. Peat was thick, dead plant material that could be found in swamps. They would cut the peat into bales and then carry them home to be dried for fuel.

Jane had eight brothers and sisters so the family was quite large. Her brothers worked outside on the farm while Jane and her sisters worked inside, helping their mother with household chores.



Jane's mother was educated at a university in Europe, like her father, so she was able to teach the children how to read and write as they grew up.

There were no schools here in the 1700s so everything that the children learned came from their parents. To her family, Jane was known as Jenny.



Jane Colden had three younger sisters and two younger brothers so she was quite busy, helping her mother while she was also learning the basic skills of reading and writing. The family had a limited supply of books so Jane could read as time permitted.

In the 1700s, children were busy from morning until evening, working and learning about the natural world that surrounded them. Jane loved to work in her own garden and she was helpful to her father, who was working to identify the flora of New York. Flora refers to plants while fauna refers to animals. Jane helped her father gather

information about the plants that lived near their home and she helped him build a book about those plants. The book, named *Plantae Coldenhamiae*, was published in Europe and her father won an award for it. The study of plants is known as botany.



**Botany** – The study of plants, the oldest of the sciences

Botany began as the study of edible, medicinal and poisonous plants.

**Edible plants** can be used as a source of food, like root crops (carrots, potatoes, beets), fruits (apples, peaches) and vegetables (peas, tomatoes). Tea was made from spearmint and sassafras bark.

**Medicinal plants** are used to relieve injury or for use in medicine. Every home had an herb garden. There were

no drug stores in those days.

**Beautiful plants** that have value because they are nice to look at or because they provide food for birds or animals.

**Poisonous plants** that could cause injury to humans or animals and which should be avoided.

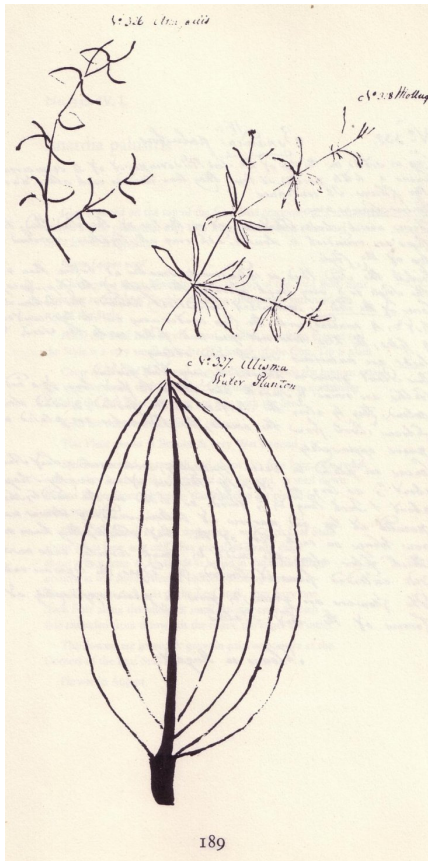


Botany was important all over the world to help people understand how they could improve living conditions for everyone. A good understanding of the world's plants was needed and one noted medical doctor and botanist from Sweden, Carl Linnaeus, developed a system of plant classifications that would be the same all over the world. Linnaeus' system, which was called Systema Naturae, was very complicated and it was also written in the ancient language of Latin.



Jane's father was familiar with Latin since most medical doctors were taught that language at the university. Jane had learned the English language quite well but she was not familiar with Latin so her father translated the Linnaeus system for her. Now Jane could read and learn about this new system of classifying plants and she began to increase her own knowledge of plants and their uses.

The image here is the actual cover of the Linnaeus book as it first appeared in 1735.



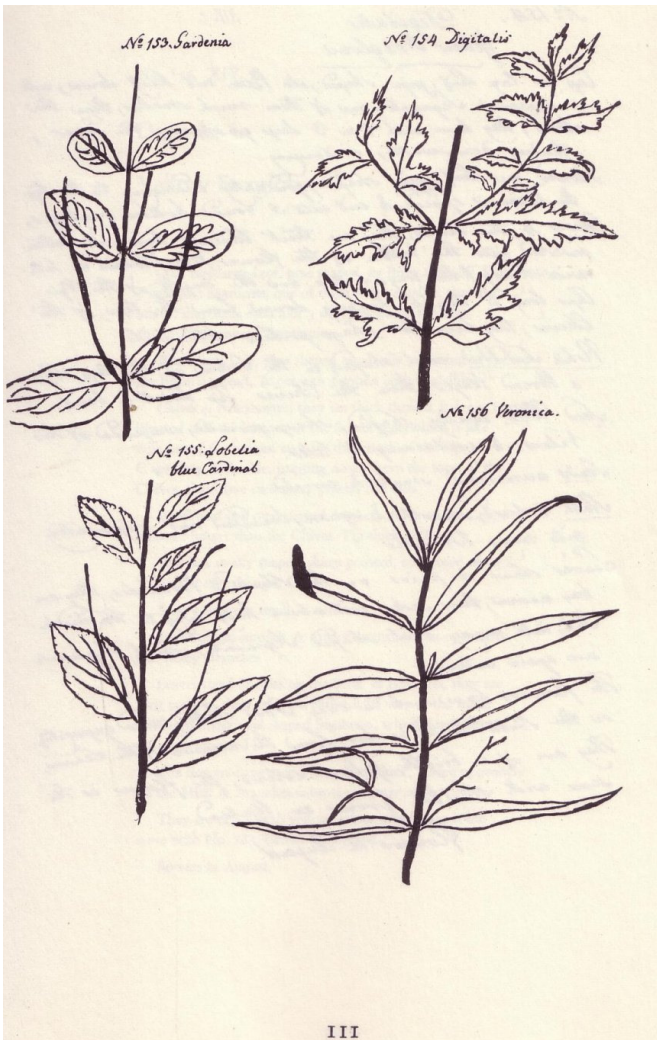
Jane kept wonderful notes and she also learned how to make impressions of leaves on paper, which allowed her to illustrate the actual structure of leaves.

The image to the left is an actual leaf impression of broad leaf plantain that Jane made during the 1750s.

Jane learned that broad leaf plantain, considered a weed by many, is useful in making a salve that helps in healing burns and wounds of the skin.

Many farmers dig plantain up since the broad leaf sometimes kills grass that their animals need for grazing.

As her botanical skills grew, Jane became known by botanists throughout the colonies and in Europe. Dr. Alexander Garden, of South Carolina, visited Coldenham and he was impressed with Jane's garden, which was extensive with flowers, vegetables and herbs.



The image to the left is an actual impression of a plant in the coffee family first illustrated by Jane Colden. She named the plant *Gardenia* in honor of Dr. Garden.

Jane received many visitors who would love to view Jane's work and listen to her speak about her love of plants.

Benjamin Franklin, who would later become a Founding Father of our country, visited Coldenham and he saw Jane's garden. Franklin knew that Jane and her research work was important to science.

The father of American botany, John Bartram of Philadelphia, sent his son, William, to Coldenham for an entire summer to learn about the world of plants from Jane.



Jane's botanical manuscript contains 341 very detailed entries with sketches and leaf impressions and is at the British Museum, shown to the left, in London today.

Her work in documenting the flora of New York earned her the International recognition as America's first lady scientist. Jane's story is remarkable. With no formal education, Jane was able to master the science of botany through determination and a lot of hard work.

In the late 1750s, London scientist Peter Collinson wrote to the famed Linnaeus of Sweden that Jane "is perhaps the first lady that has so perfectly studied your system. She deserves to be celebrated."





The South Carolina scientist, Dr. Alexander Garden, wrote that Jane Colden “is greatly a master of the Linnean method”

Jane Colden’s work is valuable today to horticulturists (plant scientists) as this sign at Coldenham Elementary School indicates. Jane is a true inspiration to young folks to work hard in their own educational goals.

End of Essay

## Glossary

- botany – the scientific study of plants to include the development of plants and their growth and value to humans and animals. This study covers over 550,000 classes of plants today.
- British Museum – Located in London, England, this museum exhibits over 70 million earth and life science items. The museum is free to all visitors and it is renowned all over the world.
- Coldenham Elementary School – A elementary school in the Valley Central School District, located on Rt 17K in Coldenham.
- eighteenth century – The years 1701 to 1800
- flora - refers to plant life that exists within a specific region.
- Fauna – refers to the animal life in a particular area or period of time.
- Horticulture – the scientific study of plants and soils for the purpose of improving the role that plants play in our lives.
- Latin – This language was commonly spoken thousands of years ago but, in recent years, has been used primarily as a common language in science and medicine.
- Peat – layers of partially decayed vegetable matter that is found in swamps and bogs.
- Province of New York – New York State as it was known before the American Revolution.
- South Carolina – now a state along the East Coast of the United States, formerly a province in the colonies.
- Scotland – a country that is part of the island of Great Britain, where England is located.
- Sweden – a country in eastern Europe

Written by: Joseph Devine, Montgomery, NY

[Jdevine001@hvc.rr.com](mailto:Jdevine001@hvc.rr.com)

This document may be copied freely, no copyright is claimed