



Camden, Botanical Gardens



Camden in 2010.

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This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.

Although no premier has ever lived there, Camden in the Botanical Gardens has been the official residence of Bermuda's premiers since 1979. It has instead been used occasionally for Government entertaining. The main house is surrounded by ancillary buildings which include a carriage house, stables and an arrowroot factory, the latter now the home of Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art. The whole complex is listed grade 1.

The core of the main house Camden is believed to date back to the early 1700s when it was owned by Colonel Francis Jones, one of the wealthiest property owners in Paget. The house and 50 acres remained in the Jones family until 1811 when it was sold to merchant William Durham who with his brother Josiah had offices in St Vincent where they prospered. Durham made major alterations and Camden as it now



stands dates to his ownership. In 1822 after the financial collapse of his Bermuda business Durham was forced to sell 'Camden Park' with its 34½ acres. The sale advertised that "The house is built more substantially and on a better plan than most of the Houses of this Colony."

The next owner was James Henry Tucker and began the long Tucker family ownership that lasted almost 150 years. Tucker was a Hamilton merchant, serving as mayor for 21 years and representing Paget in the House of Assembly. He was also a leader in agriculture, resulting in the production of arrowroot that became a lucrative export business for Bermuda. On his death in 1871, Camden was inherited by his son, Thomas Fowle Jauncey Tucker. Like his father, he served as a member of the House of Assembly and mayor of Hamilton and continued the production of arrowroot. The Tucker trade name was said to have been the guarantee in Britain and the United States that the arrowroot was of the best quality.

Thomas Tucker was responsible for adding the very fashionable two-storey wooden verandah and entrance porch. Plans drawn by 'Mr Bennett' dated November 1876 can be found in the Bermuda Archives. Inside, the elaborate cedar staircase, panelling and doors are said to have taken one craftsman, a 'Mr Jackson' 30 years to complete. Most likely this refers to John Henry Jackson who was well known as an excellent cabinet maker in addition to his business as an undertaker and as a livery stable owner. His Bermuda cedar furniture was displayed at the 1862 International Exhibition of Industry and Art held in London, England.



Camden was photographed by James Bell Heyl sometime between 1876 and 1897.



Tucker never married and lived with his sister Kate. She appears to have been mentally ill and although Thomas planned to leave her the property he never wrote a will. Camden therefore passed to a cousin, Boswell Tucker, a long-time resident and businessman of London, England, who had no intention of moving to Bermuda. Boswell sold the property to his cousin, Alexander Ewing Tucker, for £3,500. The property consisted of 56 acres which included all of Camden, the area north of Berry Hill Road now known as Camden North and the land across South Shore Road which stretches to the ocean. When Alexander died in 1934 Camden passed to his widow Violet Ethel Tucker who lived there until her death in April 1965. Under Alexander's will the property went to his nephews, Henry James (later Sir Henry) and Noel Tucker.

In July 1965 Camden and 20 acres were sold by the Tucker brothers to the Bermuda Government for £205,000. The Department of Agriculture had lost some of its property when KEMH's new wing was built earlier that year and the director Gordon Groves admitted he had long had his eye on acquiring Camden with the view of enlarging the Botanical Gardens. Groves also noted that the 17-room house had been well maintained and was in extremely good condition. The driveway off South Road led through terraced park-like grounds.

A short-lived Camden Museum with a Bermuda history exhibit opened to the public on April 2, 1968. A ground floor attraction was the recreation of an old Bermuda kitchen, fully furnished, with a display of Bermuda herbs and their uses. Although a natural history museum planned for the arrowroot factory never materialised, the building was used for the annual Agricultural Exhibition's culinary displays.

In 1978 then Premier David Gibbons (later Sir David) asked Parliament to approve \$100,000 to renovate Camden to make it suitable for a premier's residence. A good deal of entertainment had previously been done at Government House. The Bermuda National Trust oversaw the first renovation working with the Premier's wife Lully. It was then that the magnificent two-storey verandah and portico were painted white and the building was subsequently used for much entertaining of dignitaries and local people in a setting perhaps more appropriate than either Government House or a hotel.

Camden has been closed to the public since early 2019 and has only occasionally been used by premiers for meetings and lunches.

In 2019 the Bermuda National Trust was consulted by the Public Works Department because they believed that the roof was unsafe and needed to be replaced. A team of Trust staff and an architectural historian from the US who happened to be here at the time visited the



house and came to the conclusion that the roof slates had slipped a little at some time in the past but that the roof was now stable and safe. They noticed that basic maintenance had been neglected so that ficus was growing on the building and gutters were blocked. In the northwest corner of the west wing the ficus had caused considerable damage so that some masonry had been cracked, causing leaks. The team also advised that the outbuilding immediately west of the main house was in urgent need of repair because it too was being damaged by ficus. However on a recent visit it appears that masonry repairs to both buildings have been carried out although the nearby aviary is in very poor condition.

Another section of the building which the 2019 team noticed needing repair work was the verandah. It was hoped that this would soon be dealt with in 2021 when the Minister of Public Works, Colonel David Burch, launched the “Economic Stimulus Programme, Putting Bermuda to Work”. A contract for repairs was awarded and work started but appears to have come to a standstill. Attempts to discover why this is so have been unsuccessful and it is hoped that Camden and its subsidiary buildings will be treasured and preserved as they should.



Ongoing renovations to Camden continue into 2022.



The verandah is being repaired with accoya wood replacing some of the ruined cedar.

Sources: Bermuda National Trust files; *The Bermudian*, March 2004; *The Royal Gazettes* of 10 Aug 1822, 10 Sep 1950, 1 Sep 1965, 2 Apr 1968 & 20 Aug 2019; and many thanks to Drs Walwyn Hughes and David Wingate.