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Fig History In The New World

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Accounts of the history of fig culture in the New World are found in publications accessible only in widely separated libraries. This article attempts to bring together some of the more important items of historical interest and will conclude with personal observations made by the author in recent years on fig varieties collected at early settlements in the eastern United States.

The oldest fig tree in the New World is undoubtedly the Pizarro tree growing in a patio of the governor's palace in Lima, Peru. This city was founded in 1535 and it is presumed the fig tree was brought from Spain and planted a few years after the construction of the palace. It is probably, therefore, over 400 years old. The original trunk has long since perished, its place being taken by two main trunks and a few suckers. The Pizarro tree produces black figs corresponding to Negra (San Pedro), as described by Tamaro.¹ Some 50 years after the conquest of Peru, Acosta wrote "there growes apples and peares but not abundantly; there are but few plumbs but abundance of figges, chiefly in Peru."²

It was not into Peru, however, that the first introductions of figs into the New World were made. Puente y Olea found records in Seville, Spain, that European varieties of figs were first sent to the West Indies in 1520.³ Oviedo y Valdes, whose *History* was published in 1526, reported fig trees growing in various places on the Island of Española, representing the variety called Godens in Castille and Bur-

is not definitely determined. But in a letter to the King from Havana on February 17, 1577, Martinez wrote: "And what may be truthfully told your Majesty is that in Santa Elena (Parris Island, South Carolina) I planted with my own hands grape vines, pomegranate trees, orange and fig trees."⁴ Two years later Menendez wrote from "San Agustin," Florida: "There are beginning to be many fruits of Spain, such as figs, pomegranates, oranges, grapes in great quantity."⁵

It was about 40 years later that fig trees were introduced into Virginia. The ship Concord reached Virginia from the Bermudas in December, 1621, writes Alexander Brown, with "two large cedar chests wherein were fitted all such kindes and sortes of the country plants and fruits as their lland had as figgs, pomegranates," etc.⁶ Brown also relates that King James I caused his servant, John Bonnel, a Frenchman, to prepare "A Treatise on the art of making silk — together with instructions how to plant and to dress vines and to make wine and how to dry raisins, figs and other fruits."

Apparently the fig trees brought from Bermuda thrived, for Captain John Smith

¹ Domenico Tamaro, *Tratado de Fruticultura* (Barcelona, 1920).

² Joseph Acosta, *The Naturall and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies*, translated by E. G. Sims (London, 1590).

³ Manuel Puente y Olea, *Los Trabajos Geograficos de la Casa de Contratacion* (Sevilla, 1900).

⁴ G. F. Oviedo y Valdes, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, first published, 1526 (Madrid, 1851-1855), 1:288.

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jassotte in Aragon and Cataluna.⁴ Previous to the retirement of the Spanish authorities, culture of grapes and figs was prohibited in Cuba except for one vine or tree for each family in order to prevent competition with the home industry of Mother Spain.⁵ It is recorded that the fig tree was introduced into Mexico by Cortez in 1560.⁶

The exact date of the first planting of fig trees in North America by the colonists

⁴ Leon J. Canova, *Cuba*, Department of Agriculture, Commerce and Labor (Havana, 1910).

⁵ F. Unger, *Plants Used as Food by Man*, U. S. Commissioner Patents Report (Agriculture) 1859, 1860, 299-362.

⁶ Bartelome al Rey Martinez, letter to king, in Jeannette T. Connor, *Colonial Records of Spanish Florida (1577)*, 1:245.

⁷ Pedro Menendez, "A la Audiencia de Santo Domingo, San Augustin," in Connor, *Colonial Records of Spanish Florida*, 2:227.

⁸ Alexander Brown, *The First Republic in America* (Boston, 1898).

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