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FRUITLAND AUGUSTA

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## **Fruitland History**

Georgia produces approximately 140 million pounds of its official state fruit each year. Today, while the majority of the commercial peach farms are concentrated in central Georgia around Fort Valley, Augusta played a key role in the history of Georgia's evolution of becoming the "Peach state."

Augusta was once home to "Fruitland Nurseries" – one of the most successful horticultural sites of its time in the South. Located on Washington road, approximately 3 miles northwest of downtown Augusta, Fruitland planted millions of peach trees in the 1800s and early 1900s and made Georgia famous for its sweet Georgia Peaches.



Peach tree at Fruitland

The history of Fruitland goes back to 1853, when Augusta Judge, Benjamin Warren sold his 315-acre property to a local indigo farmer named Dennis Redmond, who named the property "Fruitland." He grew peaches, apples, grapes, strawberries and many kinds of trees and shrubs on the property. Redmond also began building a large house on the property he called "Fruitland Manor". In 1857, father and son, Louis and Prosper Berckmans, Belgian immigrants journeyed to America via New Jersey finally settling on Augusta as the perfect land to build their nursery. Augusta was attractive to the Berckmans not only for its ideal climate and soil for nursery, but also for the city's ideal location for transportation via water, road and rail. That year, the Berckmans acquired 50% ownership of Fruitland from Redmond and a year later, Prosper became the 100% owner

of the property. He also purchased the surrounding lands to expand the nursery and completed construction of the Fruitland Manor construction that was initiated by Redmond and made it their home.

Louis Mathieu Eduard Berckmans (1801 – 1883) was born in 1801 in Belgium and studied horticulture and medicine. His first marriage ended with the death of his wife following the birth of their son, **Prosper Jules Alphonse Berckmans** (1830 – 1910). Prosper followed his father’s footsteps and studied horticulture in Belgium and France returning to the family estate at the age of 17. In 1850, at the age of 20, Prosper made a journey to America to pursue the possibility of moving to America. Prosper visited several states in his journey mainly in the South including Augusta, yet his father decided to immigrate into New Jersey because he thought that it was ideal for a family nursery. After experiencing extremely cold winters in New Jersey, Prosper decided to move the family to Augusta in 1857.



A biographical sketch of Prosper J.A. Berckmans, Front page of the Southern World journal, May 15, 1884



Photograph of Prosper Berckmans by The National Nurseryman, 1910

Prosper soon became a well known horticulturalist and the “Father of the Peach Culture” across the South as his nursery business took off. When he arrived in Georgia, there were approximately 100,000 peach trees primarily located on family farms throughout the state. In 1858, he shipped the first Georgia Peaches to the New York market. By 1861, the Berckmans were producing over 300 kinds of peaches and many other kinds of fruits and trees at Fruitland. He developed and improved many types of peaches including the Chinese Cling, Elberta, Belle and Thurber peaches. Prosper’s Thurber was one of the South’s leading peaches until Samuel H.

Rumph of Marshallville further improved the Elberta peach, which became one of Georgia’s primary commercial peach varieties. (In 1875, Rumph also developed a peach shipment pallet design containing a box on crates holding crates of peaches and ice, which helped the Georgia Peach industry grow commercially beyond the state of Georgia.) During Prosper’s lifetime, he had introduced or improved

three of the five main varieties of Georgia Peaches. Georgia State Department of Entomology wrote in its Bulletin in 1907, “The peach should be emblazoned on the Berckmans heraldry, for President Berckmans may be justly styled the father of peach culture in the South. The improvement of the Chinese Cling type in Georgia is largely due to the energies and foresight of Messrs. Berckmans, Miller, Rumph, Husted, Stubbs and other members of the Georgia Horticultural Society.” Over Prosper’s 50 years of extensive research on peaches, he planted more than 3 million peach trees in Augusta according to the Berckmans family documents.



Fruitland catalog from 1859

By the 1880s, Fruitland was mailing out approximately 25,000 catalogs a year, many of which were sent overseas; the Fruitland catalogue read, “We ship to almost every part of the United States and our foreign trade reaches such distant points as Australia, China, Japan, Africa, the East and West Indies, Brazil, the Bermudas and every section of Europe and North and South America.” Fruitland catalogs were highly detailed, with numerous illustrations, including photos of plans, different varietal trees and an order sheet and envelope. By the turn of the 19th century, Fruitland was officially incorporated as the “PJ Berckmans Company” with all three of Prosper’s sons employed by at the company.

Prosper was also interested in other fruits; he introduced Japanese persimmon, hardy lemon, kumquat, and many more to the South. He was also a talented landscape architect; he designed numerous gardens in Augusta and in neighboring states. Thus Fruitland expanded its business with landscaping and engineering departments. In addition to thousands of trees planted on the property, there was a 60,000 square foot greenhouse; Prosper also purchased land on the Georgia Railroad near Mayfield to establish a peach orchard and to facilitate the shipping of peaches. The American Pomological Society described Fruitland as the “Southern Horticulture Mecca.”

Prosper was never shy of sharing his expertise and assistance within the horticultural community. He was an active member within the horticultural society of the United States. In 1876, Prosper founded the Georgia Horticultural Society. He was elected as the first and the only President of the organization, holding this position until his death in 1910. He also contributed to publications and journals such as

“Garden Magazines” and “Gardner’s Monthly.” He was a member of the Georgia Board of Entomology, the Georgia Experiment Station and the Richmond County Agricultural Society and president of American Pomological Society for 10 years from 1887 - 1897. In 1880, the University of Georgia awarded him an honorary Master of Science degree.



Peach trees at Fruitland in 1915 (Fruitland Catalog 1915)

On November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1910, Prosper passed away at the age of 80. The Richmond County Agricultural Society released a statement, “His love and affection for this section of his country was deep and loyal, and he was never happier than when contributing to its welfare and its progress.” Augusta Chronicle also issued a statement in 1910, “while it is true that Dr. Berckmans held a peculiar place in the esteem and affection of Augusta people, and has long played an important part in the life of this city and section, it cannot be said that he belonged to us alone, or that the sorrow and loss caused by his death will be confined to this community; for not only was he a distinguished citizen of Augusta, but an honored and esteemed spirit of the world.”

Following his death, his three sons carried on the business. His oldest son, Louis Alphonse became President of the company. His second son, Robert Craig served as Vice President and youngest son, Prosper Jules Alphonse Jr. (“Allie”) was Secretary and Treasurer. Both Louis and Allie were active landscape designers and carried out Fruitland’s landscaping department successfully. Louis was also the garden designer for Radio City Music Hall in New York.

In 1912, the Berckmans brothers struck the largest peach deal ever made in Georgia. According to Augusta Chronicle's report, the brothers sold their entire year's peach crop to a New Jersey firm for an estimated \$100,000.00.

While the brothers worked well together, there was a shift in the control of the Fruitland property after the death of their father. Prosper had willed the land to his second wife, whom he married several years after his first wife, Mary Craig died in 1897. His second wife was also a widow, who had a son from her previous marriage. According to the Berckmans' family documents, Prosper had given each of his three sons a fifth interest in the company 10 years prior to the will. The will complicated the family business and eventually the company was shut down. In 1918, less than a decade after Prosper's death, the trade name was sold to R.L. Wheeler, who had been a foreman at the Nurseries.

As the early 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, Augusta was becoming a small winter retreat for wealthy northerners. In 1925, Miami hotel mogul, J. Perry Commodore Stoltz saw the opportunity and purchased the Fruitland property in an attempt to build his winter resort "Augusta Fleetwood Resort." His construction was never completed and Fruitland property was idle for the remainder of the 1920s. In 1931, the property was eventually sold for the reported amount of \$70,000. After the acquisition, Prosper's two sons, L.A and Allie. Berckmans returned to the Fruitland property and assisted in the landscape design. The Berckmans' family home still remains on the original Fruitland property.

Augusta will always be the place that put Georgia on the map as the "Peach State" with its humble beginnings at Fruitland and the vision of the Berckmans family.

## Timeline

- 1801 Louis Mathieu Eduard Berckmans (1801 – 1883) is born October 19 in Lier, Belgium.
- 1830 Louis' wife Marie Gaudens gives birth to their son, **Prosper Jules Alphonse Berckmans** ("Prosper") (1830 – 1910) on October 13. Marie dies at childbirth.
- 1850 Prosper travels to America, mainly in the Southeast including Augusta.
- 1851 The Berckmans settle in Plainfield, New Jersey, establishing a nursery growing a thousand varieties of fruits. Prosper marries Mary Craig.
- 1853 In Augusta, Judge Benjamin Warren sells his 315-acre property to Dennis Redmond ("Redmond"). Redmond starts a nursery and names the property "Fruitland." Soon he becomes a well known nurseryman, growing peaches, apples, grapes, strawberries and many kinds of trees on his estate. Redmond promotes his nursery commercially through advertisements in the Augusta Chronicle newspaper.
- 1854 Redmond begins a construction of "Fruitland Manor" on the property, which would later become the Berckman's mansion and eventually the clubhouse for the Augusta National Golf Club.
- 1855 Prosper becomes U.S. citizen
- 1857 The Berckmans arrives in Augusta having chosen it for its ideal climate for horticulture and easy access to transportation. Louis and Propser purchase a 50% interest in the Fruitland property from Redmond.
- 1858 Prosper acquires 100% interest of Fruitland. Prosper completes Fruitland Manor construction, transforming it into the Berckmans' mansion. Prosper plants an avenue of magnolias along the approach to the house beginning at Washington Road.
- The first commercial shipment of Georgia Peaches is sent from Augusta to New York market. By this time, Prosper is known as the "father of peach culture" in the South. Prosper improves the Chinese Cling variety of peach, which eventually produced Georgia's primary commercial varieties of peaches including Elberta, Belle, and Thurber. Berckmans' Thurber becomes the leading variety (until its replacement by the Elberta, as improved by Samuel Rumph.)
- 1861 Following 3 years of operation, Fruitland's catalog lists 1300 varieties of pears, 900 varieties of apples and 300 Georgia peach varieties.
- 1870s Prosper begins contributing to publications and journals such as "Garden Magazines" and "Gardener's Monthly."
- 1876 Prosper founds the Georgia State Horticultural Society and serves as President until his death.

- 1880s Fruitland mails out approximately 25,000 catalogs a year, many of which were sent overseas.
- 1889 Fruitland is incorporated as the “PJ Berckmans Company” with all three of Prosper’s sons employed at the company.
- 1897 Prosper’s wife, Mary Craig dies. Following her death, Prosper marries a widow, with one son from a previous marriage, eventually shifting control of the Fruitland property to his second wife and stepson following his death.
- 1910 Prosper dies. His three sons carry on the family business; Louis Alphonse (“L.A”) becomes President of the company, Robert Craig as Vice President and Prosper Jules Alphonse Jr. (“PJA Jr.”) as Secretary & Treasurer.
- 1912 The Berckmans brothers initiate and successfully complete the largest peach deal ever made in Georgia. According to the Augusta Chronicle’s report, the brothers sell their entire year’s peach crop to a New Jersey firm for as much as \$100,000.00.
- 1918 Due to a shift in the control of the Fruitlands property to Prosper’s second wife and stepson, Fruitland Nurseries is shuttered and the trade name is sold to R. L. Wheeler, who had been a foreman at the nurseries.
- 1925 The actual land is sold to famous Miami hotel mogul, J. Perry Commodore Stoltz. By this time, Augusta is known as a winter vacation destination and Stoltz begins the construction of his new property “Augusta Fleetwood Resort” on Fruitland property. However soon the construction is discontinued due to a hurricane that damaged his flagship property in Miami. For the remainder of the 1920s the Fruitland property remains idle. Caretakers of the property occupy the mansion.
- 1931 By this time, Stoltz no longer owns Fruitland; it is the property of the Georgia Railroad Bank and Trust Company. The property was eventually sold for a reported amount of \$70,000.
- L.A. Berckmans, at the age of 74, returns to the Fruitland property to help design the landscape to serve in an advisory capacity. P.J.A. Jr., at the age 65 also served the Club as General Manager. Together they were able to save over 4,000 old trees and shrubs on the property.
- 1933 The 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment repeals the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment known as the Volstead Act ending the prohibition of liquor.



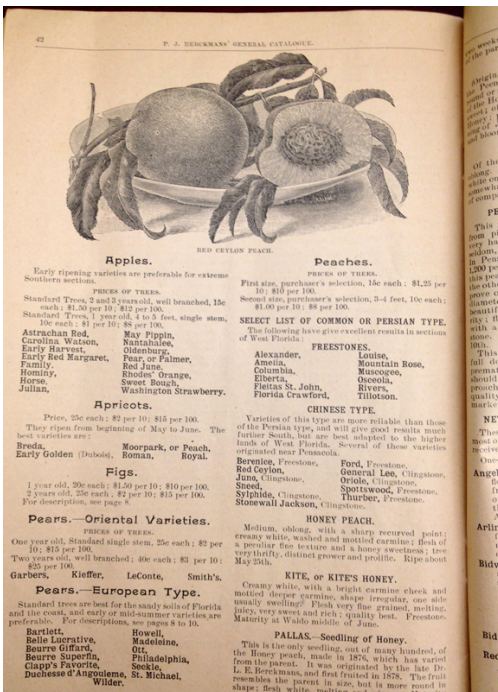
# Fruitlands Nursery Catalogues



Fruitland catalog (1898)



Back of 1898 catalog



Inside Fruitland catalog (1896) Showing an illustration of "Red Ceylon Peach" and the list of peaches available for sale



1911 Fruitland Catalogue cover with Magnolia Soulangeana grown at Fruitland Nurseries



*From 1911 Fruitlands Nurseries catalogue:*



“We have been growing trees, shrubs and plants at Fruitland Nurseries for more than fifty years. The Nurseries were established in 1856. The attention of Mr. P. J. Berckmans, the founder of Fruitland Nurseries, was attracted to the neighborhood of Augusta not only by the delightful climate, but by the many advantages it possessed for an enterprise like Fruitland Nurseries. Here may be grown the finest and most vigorous specimens of most of the fruits and ornamentals that thrive in the North, as well as those which serve their greatest usefulness in the South.

Augusta is just about the dividing line of the North and South in matters horticultural. Evergreens and other hardy trees and shrubs grown by us have demonstrated their adaptability to a wide range of territory.

Aside from the climate advantages which we have, the Fruitland Nurseries are particularly well off in the matter of soil. In our home tract of 400 acres, located west of and adjoining the limits of the city of Augusta, on Washington road (a continuation of Broad street) and one and one-half miles from the terminus of the Lake View Electric Car Line, we have soils of almost every texture to be found anywhere, ranging from stiff clay to the most friable sand. We are thus enabled to grow everything in the character of soil best adapted to it.

In addition to the home location, we have a 20-acre arm, ten miles away, constituted largely of new land and now almost entirely planted in nursery stock. On our home farm, also, more than thirty acres are devoted to orchards and test grounds. Our nurseries now contain more than twenty-five acres of roses, over one hundred acres of evergreens and deciduous trees and shrubs, and about three hundred acres of fruit trees and small fruits and vines.

In our greenhouse and plant department we have a total of in excess of 60,000 square feet of glass. Every appliance of proved merit which affords an economy of labor and adds to the production of healthy stock

is utilized. An area of 50,000 square feet of cold frames allow us to carry through the winter a large stock of plans which do not require artificial heat in our mild climate. Our trees and plans in point of quality and a perfect adaptability to a wide range of climate, as well as in size, health, vigor, are equal to those produced by any other nursery establishment in the United States.

If it were not immodest, we might successfully claim that in many lines we offer a superior trade of stock not obtainable anywhere else. We ship to almost every part of the United States, and our foreign trade reaches such distant points as Australia, China, Japan, Africa, the East and West Indies, Brazil, the Bermudas and every section of Europe and North and South America. It is not our object to grow or offer cheap stock, such as is so often palmed off on the public. Within the last few years the cost of production has increased rapidly, until in many cases it has fully doubled. The market price of stock in many instances is equaled by the cost of production, owing to the rapid advance in the price of labor and materials; therefore, when quality of produce is considered, our prices will be found as low as those of any first-class nursery.”

*Sources:*

*The New Georgia Encyclopedia, W. Michael Reynolds, Brockington and Associates, Inc. Augusta Chronicle (1912 “\$100,000 given for a crop of peaches” June, Vol CXXVI No. 163), Augusta.com/Augusta Chronicle Website, Georgia Department of Natural Resources/Historic Preservation Division, National Park Services/U.S. Department of the Interior, Augusta History Museum, The Courier Herald, Kathryn C. Taylor, University of Georgia, Smithsonian Libraries, The Southern Garden History Society, Atlanta History Center/Kenan Research Center (Prosper Jules Alphonse Berckmans Collection, donated by Carol Berckmans Davis, Mary Craig Berckmans, Anne Berckmans Barrett and Caroline Horne Berckmans), Forbes Magazine, Peach County Georgia, Atlanta History Center/Kenan Research Center, Magnolia – Bulletin of the Southern Garden History (Winter 2002 – 2003), The National Nurseryman. Georgia State Dept. of Entomology/State Board of Entomology (Bulletin No. 23, February 1907)*

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