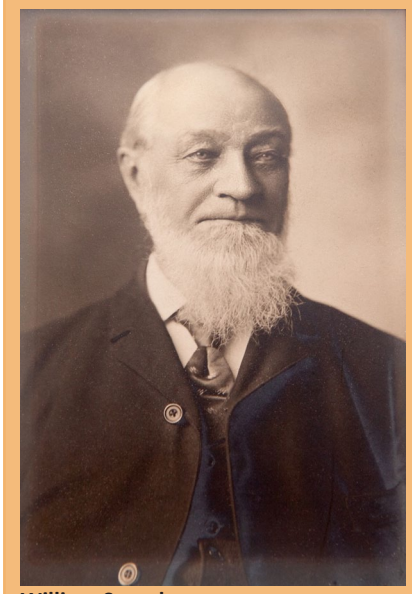
Did You Know?



William Saunders.

On November 19, 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address, standing at his shoulder was William Saunders, First Superintendent of Experimental Gardens of the newly created U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Saunders was there because he was the designer, at Lincoln's request, of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg being dedicated that day.

It was a first-of-its-kind battlefield memorial, with each grave equally marked only by flat, grey granite rectangles. Saunders also created extensive plantings to frame the site's vistas, specifying uncommon trees and shrubs, many of which he himself had recently introduced to this country.

The extensive landscaping, coupled with the absence of grand headstones or sculptures, was unique—never previously seen in the United States or Europe.

But Saunders' connections to ARS go far beyond that. His devotion to introducing thousands of new plants foreshadowed ARS's mission of germplasm collection and preservation. His introductions included the Japanese persimmon, the *Eucalyptus globulus* tree, the Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*), the camphor tree, one of the first magnolia trees in Washington, DC, and 300 varieties of winter-hardy apples from Russia—which had a profound effect on apple growing in the Northeast.

The most impactful may have been a remarkable seedless navel orange from Bahia, Brazil. Two of the seedlings went to Riverside, CA, as a potentially useful crop. The orange was eventually named the "Washington navel orange," and "This new, large, sweet and seedless fruit was … largely responsible for the development of many new cities, fruit packing houses, inventions in boxing machines, fruit wraps and the iced railroad car," as recounted in *A History of the Parent Washington Navel Orange Tree*.

Because the Washington navel orange is indeed seedless, every one of today's millions of trees is a graft from one of those original two, of which one is still alive and producing in Riverside.

Even more importantly, Saunders established the standard for systematic evaluation and reporting about the characteristics of the thousands of new plants being introduced into the United States. His codified guidelines set the standard to which ARS and other research organizations adhere today.

Saunders' manuscripts and journals are part of the Special Collections at the National Agricultural Library.

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