

## Virginia Garden Named for James Burke, Ancestor of Scott Co. Burkes

(Source: [www.craborchardmuseum.com](http://www.craborchardmuseum.com))

Perhaps Tazewell County's most well-known place, Burke's Garden – an agricultural paradise atop a mountain – provides a stark contrast to the County's coal mining region that has made Pocahontas so historic.

A bit of geological history: Eons ago, the earth was covered by the sea. In the shallowest parts of the sea, vegetation sprung up and sturdy trees grew. In the course of the years, the vegetation and trees were buried under the rising water of the sea, and these organic remains gradually were transformed into the precious coal that has been so important to Tazewell County and its region.

Ancient rivers also poured mud, sand, and pebbles into this developing sea, and these in time became limestone, shale, and sandstone, all abundant in parts of the county. In the deepest parts of this prehistoric sea, there thrived the marine animals that left us the fossils and shells that Tazewell people are still finding in their explorations along riverbeds, and that miners have removed from their work in the coal seams.

A large part of the seabed, with its rock formation unbroken, was left elevated above the water as the sea receded. From the heights, rivers were spawned to wind their ways to the ocean. Folding and arching of the rocks into the series of mountain ranges and peaks occurred as the earth's crust shrank. Glaciers later helped rearrange some of the rivers and create new ones.

Tazewell lore has it that God lovingly patted the tops of many of these peaks to make them rounded and not so steep and harsh. The sheer number of these green, rounded hillocks within mountain ranges is a unique geological feature of the County, one that lends it a special charm that many feel resembles the Highlands of Scotland.

Here is a stunning mountain peak into which a bowl of rich farmland was carved. They sometimes call it "God's Thumbprint."

First explored in 1748 by eastern Virginians while the entire region was being surveyed for James Patton, who claimed ownership, Burke's Garden actually earned its name, and in an unusual way. James Burke, one of the survey team, left the peelings of potatoes he was cooking



Figure 1 - Burke's Garden, VA. Post Office - Menda Burke Williams and Coleen Cox in 1999 photo. Coleen Cox was postmaster from 1969 until her death on February 22, 2009. The post office is temporarily closed.

laying on the ground. A year later, he and other explorers returned and found a bountiful crop of fresh potatoes awaiting them.



Region: Heart of Appalachia  
Locality: Tazewell Co., Rt. 625, Tazewell, VA  
24651

It's 25,000 acres of soil remains highly fertile, perhaps the most fertile in Virginia, and Burke's Garden is on the National Register as an historic rural area.

Fewer than 300 people live in Burke's Garden, and over the years since around 1800, the owners of the land have been reluctant to part with it. By 1820, there were only 22 landowning families in "the Garden." By 1850, there were 83 families, most of them long-term tenants. It was from the start a prosperous community, and its leading landowners were all of

German origin. The County's oldest house of worship is the simple Lutheran Church, adjacent to a cemetery with headstones reflecting the German origins of the community.

In the late 1800s, Burke's Garden was visited by agents for the Vanderbilt family, which chose a location there to build a castle. However, no matter what price the Vanderbilts offered, no one would sell the land. The castle venture moved to near Ashville, N.C., site of the world-famous Biltmore estate.

In addition to the fabled coal seam that rises above-ground in Pocahontas, where the region's mining was first started, Burke's Garden is one of the county's most noted geological formations. It is actually a circular valley atop Garden Mountain. Its 300 residents have the

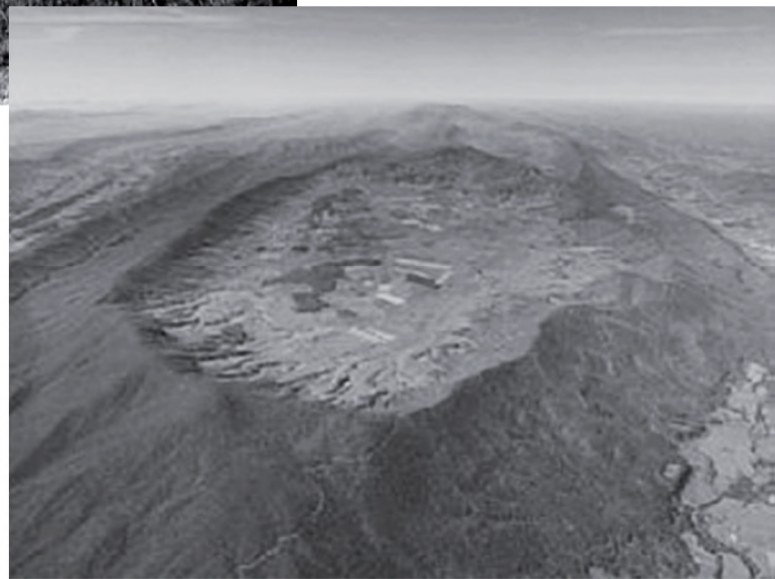


Figure 2 - The bowl-shaped valley known as Burke's Garden covers about 20 sq. miles. It's roughly 3,000 feet above sea level, and is almost entirely surrounded by ridges that rise up to 1,700 ft. above the valley floor. Water exits the valley by way of Burke's Garden Creek, which flows through a narrow gap on the north side. Known for its fertility and great natural beauty, Burke's Garden is the highest valley in Virginia.

state's smallest private telephone company and farm on rich soil within a nationally registered Rural Historic District.

As Virginia's highest valley, it is 3,000 feet above sea level. Garden Mountain towers an average of 1,000 feet in a ring above Burke's Garden valley itself. Tazewell people have taken to calling Burke's Garden "God's Thumbprint." When this section of the Clinch Mountain range was pushed upwards eons ago, a huge fold or rock was pushed into a "dome," which then gradually eroded to its present bowl within the mountains.

Beneath Burke's Garden are caves which have given a safe haven to species of reptiles that are either hard to find or are otherwise extinct. The mud salamander normally lives in cypress swamps on the coast and has never before been found at such a high elevation. There is a golden-striped, green salamander not seen so far inland. Two species of millipede, two of stoneflies, and one type of cave beetle are found in Burke's Garden's caverns, but nowhere else in the world.