

A Magnificent Cucumber Magnolia

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A magnificent specimen of *Magnolia acuminata* (L.) L., commonly known as cucumbertree or cucumber magnolia, grows overlooking the Appomattox River in Colonial Heights, Virginia. The tree stands at 303 Virginia Avenue on property known as Violet Bank, which once included the plantation house of Thomas Shore, a shipping merchant. The house was built circa the American Revolution, and was chosen by French General Lafayette as his headquarters in 1781 during the Revolutionary War. The original house burned in 1810; the house was rebuilt by his widow, completed in 1815. This second house is now known as Violet Bank Museum. General Robert E. Lee's headquarters was established here in 1864 at the beginning of the siege of Petersburg.

The tree was planted in 1718, according to signage near the tree, although other information states the planting date as 1833. One legend says that Thomas Shore planted the tree from a slip given to him by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was a frequent visitor at Violet Bank. Another account is that the tree was planted by a member of the Knights of the Golden Horseshoe, an exploration and conservation group of which George Washington was a member. Yet another account is that it was planted by Peter Francisco, a Revolutionary War soldier. A fourth story is that one of Shore's daughters brought the sapling back from a visit to White Sulphur Springs after being impressed by one at the health spa.

The tree is the state champion cucumber magnolia, and it is believed to be the third largest of the species documented in the United States. The national champion is located in North Canton, Ohio, with circumfer-



ence of 288 in., 79 ft. tall and 88 ft. wide. Cucumber magnolia is a deciduous species with non-showy flowers and unripe fruits that resemble small cucumbers. It is a large, cold-hardy magnolia found primarily in the Appalachians. It makes an excellent shade tree for parks and gardens with ample space.