



The honeybee is not native to the Western Hemisphere. Bees were first shipped from England to Virginia and then to other colonies in New England, the mid-Atlantic, and further south.

When England started taxing sugar in colonial America in 1765, honey became the preferred sweetener and a source of income.



Bees were intended to provide sustenance and a livelihood for immigrants in search of new opportunities. Colonists imagined their own work reflected in bee traits of industry and thrift so the image of the busy hive soon began shaping American ideals about work, family, and community. The image of the bee skep continued to be popular into the twentieth century, symbolizing a society working together for the common good.



The Arlington Historical Society was founded in 1956 and is a 501.3(c) nonprofit educational organization. The goal of the Arlington Historical Society is to conduct research, preserve, and share knowledge of the history of Arlington County, Virginia.

The Arlington Historical Society wishes to thank the following

🐝 Owen Yingling, Eagle Scout

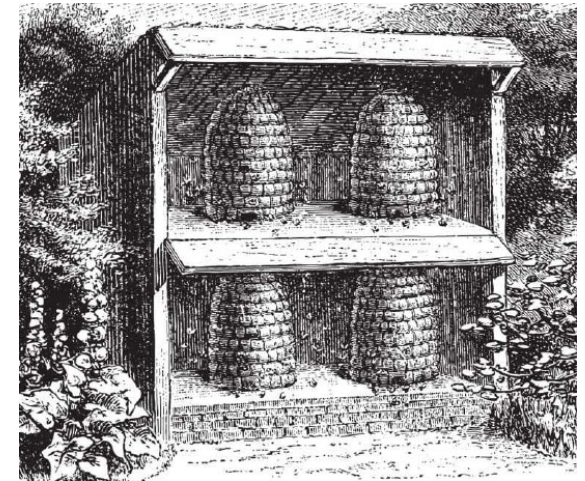
🐝 Virginia Johnson for her book "*Virginia Honey: A Sweet History*"



🐝 Volunteers of the Arlington Historical Society



Beekeeping at the Ball-Sellers House



The Oldest House in
Arlington County Virginia
c.1750

A museum owned by the Arlington
Historical Society

5620 3rd Street, South
Arlington, Virginia



Early American Beekeeping

Honeybees were transported to Virginia in skeps from England in 1622. Most were transported in the winter months when bees were dormant.

What is a Bee Skep?

A skep was an early way to keep bees and harvest honey. It was made of straw twisted together to form a thick rope which was coiled to form a dome. It had no bottom and was placed on a wooden platform.



The hollow cavity inside provided room for captured swarms of bees to build honeycombs attached to the inside. Each skep had a small hole on the side for bees to fly in and out or it was raised slightly to allow bees to come and go at the bottom. To harvest the honey, beekeepers would drive out the bees and rip the skep apart. Straw was plentiful and skeps would be remade.

The word skep is thought to have come from the Nordic word *skeppa* meaning a basket measure of grain. This beekeeping method, also called a basketry hive, was common until the modern wooden hive began to be used in the 1850s. Today, the image of a bee skep still denotes being busy and industrious.

Colonial Honey Use

John and Elizabeth Ball lived here starting in 1742 and they kept bees. When John died in 1766, his will stipulated that all his possessions be inventoried and sold with the money given to his wife and five daughters. We know from this inventory that he had four beehives.

Understanding pollination, the Ball family probably placed the skep stand near their apple and pear trees to help pollinate them. Colonial Virginians often grew the herb lemon balm because they rubbed it inside the skep to encourage captured bees to stay. They placed wooden sticks inside the skep to create a foundation for the wax.

Colonists usually waited until winter when bees were less active to harvest the honey. Farmers, like the Balls, could expect to produce from 50 to 100 pounds of honey in each bee colony depending on the climate and the size of the colony. Honey would be used as a sweetener or to make mead, a fermented drink.

Honeybees produced wax which had several uses in colonial times, including:

- 🐝 Candles
- 🐝 Shoe wax
- 🐝 Waterproofing
- 🐝 Barrel coating.



The Eagle Scout Project

The Ball-Sellers House bee skeps and their wooden stand were produced by Owen Yingling who led the project as part of a requirement to become an Eagle Scout, the highest rank in the Boy Scouts.

A key requirement to become an Eagle Scout is to be in a leadership position for at least six months. This project required the scout to research, plan, and lead his troop in constructing the model.

Eagle Scout Yingling planned the project, conducted historical research, consulted and coordinated with the Arlington Historical Society, and led his troop to construct four skeps and build the wooden stand. He chose to make skeps instead of an equally historically accurate wooden beehive because skeps are a more well-known symbol of beekeeping.



Bee button excavated at the Ball-Sellers House in 2016. This may have been worn by a supporter of prohibition as a symbol of working hard instead of drinking alcohol.

The Arlington Historical Society is grateful for these model skeps and stand. We appreciate the historical rigor Eagle Scout Yingling showed in his research and applaud his interest in history.