In about 1745, a letter was sent from Virginia to Carolus Linnaeus, the great Swedish botanist who is remembered chiefly for his firm establishment of the binomial system of nomenclature which we still follow today in the plant and animal kingdom. The letter accompanied a package of plant specimens from this state. The writer apologized for his inexperienced use of Latin, claiming that he had been so long in “these rich regions” that he had become out of the habit of expressing himself in Latin. Rich regions! How right he was, and would still be today. The writer of the letter was John Clayton, one of Virginia’s earliest and best botanists.

John Clayton was born and educated in England, but he came to Virginia as a young man in the early part of the eighteenth century, and remained here until his death in 1773. He held a position as clerk of Gloucester County for fifty-three years. He is frequently confused with the Reverend John Clayton who was also a resident of Virginia and keenly interested in natural history, but was only a very distant relation and belongs to a much earlier period. Mr. John Clayton collected extensively in the state and sent many specimens to Europe where they were examined and classified mainly by Linnaeus and Gronovius, an eminent Dutch physician and natural historian in Leiden. In the British Museum in London there is a collection of about five hundred plants which Clayton made, and which is still a valuable asset to students of North American botany.

Linnaeus had a great regard for his Virginia colleague. In 1737 he paid him one of the highest scientific compliments by naming a genus after him. This was Claytonia, whose attractive white and pink flowers are aptly known as Spring Beauties, one of the first blooms to which we can look forward in the Virginia spring.

Claytonia belongs to the Portulacaceae, a family which includes as well the purslances and toadflax. The flowers are often slightly fleshy. They have two sepals, generally five petals, as in Claytonia, and five, ten or more stamens. In Claytonia, there are five stamens which are inserted on the petals of the petals.

Claytonia virginica may be a foot tall, the stem rising from an underground horn. The flowers have a curious arrangement, being carried on two rows of short stalks on one side of the main stem. Each flower blooms for a day, then bends to one side, and a lateral flower starts up from below and pushes up to bloom in its turn. Opposite the lowest flower on the other side of the main stem there is often a small bract. The flowers vary from white through deep pink with darker red stripes on the petals. The leaves are very narrowly oval, usually with short leaf stalks or petioles. The shape of the leaves is one of the main characteristics which distinguishes this species from Claytonia caroliniana, similar in many features and habitat, but with much broader, rounded leaves, and generally smaller, paler flowers.

Spring Beauty has a wide distribution up and down the eastern side of the United States, and as far west as Minnesota and Texas. It likes rich oak-hickory woods, rather than woods which contain many evergreens, but also grows in open fields and along roadsides. It can be transplanted easily, the little pea-sized corms growing well in a fairly neutral soil with plenty of humus and moisture. It can also be forced into bloom indoors ahead of its normal flowering time, but it seems somehow a little more honorably to wait and enjoy it as it comes out naturally in the woods. In Virginia one does not have to wait long. It starts flowering in March, and in some areas will be found in bloom on into May.

What a nice flower to be remembered for! But John Clayton deserves his rewards. It was from his notes and catalog that Gronovius compiled the first important flora of British North America. The Flora Virginica was published in Leiden in two parts in 1739 and 1743. The first part was actually published without Clayton’s knowledge, but apparently when the news finally reached him, through the slow communication channels of the eighteenth century, he was well pleased. He must have been pleased, also, when such an attractive flower was named after him. And we, too, can be glad that this same flower is still quite common in Virginia more than two hundred years later.