

Lt. Colonel Nathaniel Pope

George Washington is often and rightly called “The Indispensable Man” in American history. Nathaniel Pope played an indispensable role too, for without Nathaniel Pope (and a certain providential sandbar in the Potomac River) George Washington would likely have been an Englishman who fought on the British side in the Revolutionary War.

Nathaniel Pope is a shadowy figure in many ways. We don’t know precisely where or when he was born. He was certainly an Englishman, and the fact that his son Thomas eventually returned from Virginia to England and settled in Bristol suggests that Nathaniel Pope probably was from Bristol or its environs. After sailing to the New World, Nathaniel first settled in Maryland about 1637. In his will he names his wife as “Luce” (Lucy), but we do not know her maiden name. He moved to Virginia about 1650, and in 1651 he obtained a patent for a 1050-acre plantation called “The Cliffs” along the Potomac River in Westmoreland County. In 1655 he was commissioned Lt. Colonel in the local militia. His will was dated May 16, 1659 and probated April 26, 1660.

Nathaniel Pope’s connection with the Washington family was the result of a remarkable chain of events that began about Nov. 1756. Young John Washington sailed from England for Virginia as a junior partner and first mate of a sea captain named Edward Prescott aboard a ketch called *The Sea Horse of London*. It is clear that John intended this venture as a brief two-way trip. The partners sold their goods in exchange for a cargo of tobacco to take back to England. A storm struck on or about Feb. 28, 1757, as they were sailing down the Potomac on their return voyage to England. Suddenly the ship struck a sandbar and was being pounded by the storm. In search of help, John Washington swam or waded ashore, and he was taken in by the kind-hearted Nathaniel Pope. As his badly battered ship was slowly being repaired, John stayed as a guest with Nathaniel and fell in love with his daughter Anne. They were soon married, and their son Lawrence had a son Augustine who was the father of George Washington.

SOURCES

There is a lengthy and comprehensive chapter on Lt. Col. Nathaniel Pope in volume 1 of Charles A. Hoppin’s 3-volume work *Washington Ancestry* (1932). See also volume one of Douglas S. Freeman’s 7-volume masterful biography *George Washington* and also Charles E. Hatch, Jr., *Popes Creek Plantation: Birthplace of George Washington*. James H. Barr III has privately published a valuable and authoritative genealogy of Nathaniel Pope’s descendants, *Nathaniel Pope of Virginia* (2018).