

## Washingtons in Fredericksburg

When one starts to think about the Washingtons who were in or around Fredericksburg in the early days, it almost seems it might be easier and quicker to consider those Washingtons who were not at Fredericksburg.

The city is situated at the falls of the Rappahannock, which could be defined as the northwestern end of the Northern Neck. Even more now than in the past, as we travel more by land rather than by river, the location seems a gateway in and out of the area where the American Washingtons started in 1657 and thrived for centuries.

In the 1720's, when the Fredericksburg region began to attract settlers in any number, one of the earliest and most aggressive entrepreneurs was Henry Willis ( 1691:2-1740), the younger son of a wealthy Gloucester County family. His older brother, of course, had inherited the family properties, and Henry had to make his own way. He acquired land, he bought and sold house lots, he took contracts to build tobacco warehouses, the courthouse, and the church, he served as sheriff, a lucrative job, he became a member of the vestry and of the county court, and a member of the House of Burgesses. But above all, he courted three prosperous young ladies. When they all turned him down, he waited his turn and then proceeded to marry all three of them in succession, when they were rich widows. He gets into the Washington genealogy, when in 1734 he married the third one, none other than our George Washington's aunt and godmother, Mildred Washington Lewis Gregory ( 1696:8-1747). Not only had she inherited the 2500 remote acres which later became Mount Vernon, and which she sold to her brother, George's father, but she had clearly inherited a good deal from her earlier husbands. The first, John Lewis, was primogeniture head of the family of her Warner-Hall Lewis cousins, but he died childless

The second husband, Roger Gregory, left no son to inherit land, but only three daughters. In either such case the widow would inherit more than if there had been a son. She wisely contrived to protect her assets, by a pre-marital agreement and a deed of a gift to her five-year-old son, from Henry Willis's speculative and constantly shifting fortunes and is credited by her descendants with saving the family's assets.

Her three Gregory daughters, as everyone seems to know, married the three Thornton brothers, and lived in the neighborhood. Then, her son by Henry Willis, Lewis Willis ( 1734-1813), was a lifelong prominent resident of the town, living at Willis Hall, apparently built by his mother after his father's death.

Frances Gregory ( 1719-ca 1794) and her husband Francis Thornton, Jr. ( 1711:12-1749) of Fredericksburg had six children and very numerous descendants there and in the vicinity. Their eldest son, Francis Thornton ( ca 1737-1794:5), built the house, Fall Hill, still owned by descendants.

Another important Washington arrival on the Fredericksburg scene was Mildred's brother,

Augustine Washington ( ca 1694-1743). While he had long been involved in the iron business nearby, he moved his residence in 1738 to the property across the river now called Ferry Farm. Thus George Washington knew this as his boyhood home, and here his mother lived until 1772. Then she moved from the farm into what is now called the Mary Washington house in the city. In Fredericksburg George's sister, Betty Washington ( 1733-1797), lived from her marriage in 1750 to her cousin Fielding Lewis ( 1725-1781) until 1796, a year before her death. Here George Washington invariably visited the Lewises on his frequent trips from Mount Vernon to the capitol in Williamsburg. Fielding Lewis may indeed be considered the most prominent citizen of the town, if only because of his support and management of the gun factory during the Revolution. Their house, now called Kenmore, is easily the most beautiful surviving building in Fredericksburg. While most of Betty's six surviving children scattered, one son, Robert Lewis ( 1769-1829), did stay in Fredericksburg. He lived for a time at Pine Grove, a farm just up the river from Ferry Farm, before moving into the town, where in 1820 he was elected Mayor.

Augustine's son Charles Washington ( 1738-1799), George's youngest brother, is scarcely remembered in Fredericksburg. However, he played a surprisingly prominent role there until he moved about 1780 to the then Frederick County, ( now Jefferson County, West Virginia), built his home, Happy Retreat, and found the village of Charles Town on his farm. In Fredericksburg in 1764 he became a member of the vestry and in 1769 a justice of the court, and was unusually faithful, compared to his colleagues, in his attendance and activity in these positions. He owned several town lots, on two of which he built his house. After he sold it and moved away, it became a tavern, now called the Rising Sun. He was a trustee of the town. He also owned a couple of country properties. Then as the Revolution approached, he was a member of the Spotsylvania County Committee of Safety. His younger son Samuel Washington ( 1771-1831) married his cousin Dorothea Thornton ( 1778-1813) of Fall Hill and lived in a cottage there briefly, but since 1800 none of Charles's many descendants seem to have lived in Fredericksburg.

One might wonder why no members of the eldest branch of the family, descended from John Washington ( 1692-1746), the older brother of Mildred and Augustine, have been mentioned. The answer seems to be that they were so comfortably settled in Gloucester County in the old Warner neighborhood that they felt no need to move, until finally around 1770 there was the great migration of most of the leading families of that neighborhood to the new farming and plantation area which is now Clarke County. There the Society once visited three of their house, Fairfield, Audley, and Llewellyn. However, one daughter of this branch, Catherine Washington ( 1724/5-1750) did live in Fredericksburg as the first wife of her cousin Fielding Lewis, before he married Betty Washington as his second wife. Catherine's son, the five-times-married John Lewis ( 1747-1825) was a lifelong prominent citizen of Fredericksburg, although most of his descendants settled in Kentucky.

The numerous younger branches of the Washington family who remained in Westmoreland, King George, and Stafford Counties in the Northern Neck had many descendants there. These include, for example, the group known as the "Chotankers" like Robert and Lawrence Washington, "the friends of my juvenile years" of George

Washington's will. All of them must have regarded Fredericksburg as their nearest city, and come to it from time to time, when necessary. Enough of them have settled there in more recent times, after 1800, that the descendants are very numerous in and about the city. None, however, of the eighteenth-century members of these branches seem to have come in from the country life and taken part in the eighteenth-century development of the city or been among its leader in those early days.

The court records of Fredericksburg are extraordinarily well preserved, and there is no dearth of additional information that can be found about these early inhabitants of the city and its environs. A lifetime could be spend in learning about them, and indeed at least one or two people have done almost exactly that.

Submitted by John A. Washington, 2008