

## A PHANTOM FERRY

By

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### Importance of Ferries in Colonial Days

The early settlement of Virginia was along the shores of the rivers, many of them navigable for considerable distances inland, that border the eastern edge of the Commonwealth. Transportation by water was easier than over land. Each riverside plantation had its wharf and was well supplied with boats and barges of various kinds. As settlement moved inland, however, people and goods began to move by horsepath and what passed for roads across the land. To such travelers, a broad or deep stream or river posed a barrier. In the absence of a suitable ford or bridge, the natural answer was the establishment of ferries.

The General Assembly of Virginia recognized the importance of ferries to the public. As early as 1643 the Assembly declared that they were to be maintained at public expense.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, the County Courts were given power to establish ferries and fix the rates they might charge.<sup>2</sup> Act I of the Assembly session of 1702 set out detailed regulations for ferries, decreed they should be kept at specified locations, and set the rates to be charged for carrying a man and a horse. The County Courts were directed to appoint a ferrykeeper and give him a license to operate, in effect establishing a monopoly.<sup>3</sup>

The location of a ferry tells us a good deal about the area it served and what the local transportation routes were, and gives a clue to the advance of settlement. These locations generally are spelled out quite clearly in legislation or placed on contemporary maps. For some, however, the exact site is shrouded in mystery. One such was in the Arlington area. We are faced with the question: was there a ferry in the early 1700s at the site of present Chain Bridge or the mouth of Pimmit Run?

### The Puzzle

The late Ludwell Lee Montague wrote<sup>4</sup> that Frances Awbrey was engaged by Thomas Lee to establish a landing, ferry, and ordinary at Lee's land at the Falls of the Potomac, i.e., the Little Falls. He did not cite a source for this statement, nor does a search of his papers reveal any pre-

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<sup>1</sup> W. W. Hening, *Statutes of Virginia*, I, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Hening, I, p. 348.

<sup>3</sup> Hening, III, p. 218 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwell Lee Montague, "Thomas Lee at the Spout of the Potomac," *Arlington Historical Magazine* (1970), p. 28 ff.

liminary notes he may have had in the preparation of this article. Internal evidence suggests reliance on Fairfax Harrison's *Landmarks of Old Prince William*.

Montague described Lee's land in that area in modern terms as:

Its inland boundary ran up Donaldson Run and a branch thereof to Thomas St.; thence northward, generally west of Military Road and then to the overpass that carries Old Glebe Road over the new road, to Pimmit Run at a point about 900 yards above its mouth; thence up Pimmit Run to a point southwest of Fort Marcey [sic]; thence a little west of north (including Fort Marcey [sic]) to the river at the Little Falls.

Montague relates that Frances Awbrey died in 1741 leaving the ferry and the inn to his son Richard who, in 1748, moved them to Analostan Island (now Theodore Roosevelt Island).

Fairfax Harrison in "Thomas Lee at the Falls"<sup>5</sup> mentions that there was a ferry at the Pimmit Run site prior to 1737, citing Robert Brook's Poto-mac map of that year as showing "Magee's ferry" there. He also says that Brooke mentioned the ferry in his expense account for that survey, giving the *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, vol. 1, p. 229 as his source. He further says that Awbrey's ferry license is to be found in Hening, vol. 5, p. 66, and gives the *Journal of the House of Burgesses, 1742-49*, p. 262 and p. 325 as the source for his statement that the ferry was moved in 1748 to Analostan Island.

This seems straightforward enough until one begins to examine the references and check a little further.

Robert Brook's map of 1737 distinctly shows "McGees Ferry"<sup>6</sup> on the Georgetown side of the mouth of Rock Creek, although the map runs as high as the Falls and thus would encompass the Chain Bridge area.<sup>7</sup>

The bill which Robert Brooke presented on April 25, 1737, claimed reimbursement for hiring a canoe to go from "Capt. Awbreys to Shenendo [Shenandoah] and down to Sinigar [Seneca Creek]," and for the hire of a horse and boy (John Wilcoxon's son) to "bring our things from Sinigar to Magees [sic]." There is no mention of ferriage nor would such a trip require any below the Falls if it were all on the Maryland side of the river.

Francis Awbrey's will<sup>8</sup> did leave to his son Richard the "fifty acres where the ferry and ordinary is kept." But how could he have left such

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<sup>5</sup> Fairfax Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William* (Richmond: Old Dominion Press, 1924), p. 143 ff.

<sup>6</sup> The name appears variously as "Magee" and "McGee" throughout the contemporary references.

<sup>7</sup> Neither the Chain Bridge nor Georgetown were in existence at the time; the designations are used for easy modern reference.

<sup>8</sup> Prince William County Will Book "C," p. 341. It was dated December 14, 1741, witnessed February 22, 1741, and probated March 23, 1741. The latter two dates are Old Style, i.e., the new year began on March 25. The change to the present style was made in 1753.

land had it been located in the Chain Bridge area when it was Lee, not Awbrey, who owned that land?

Harrison's reference to Awbrey's ferry license, upon investigation, throws no light on the subject. According to the Hening citation, Chapter 16 of the November 1738 session includes, among the list of public ferries to be kept, one "on Potowmack river, from the Plantation of Francis Awbrey, in the County of Prince William,<sup>9</sup> over to Maryland." There is no clue as to the exact location of this ferry.

It begins to appear that we are dealing with two different ferries.

### **Where Was Magee's Ferry?**

Let us look first at the evidence on where "Magee's ferry" actually was located.

It is shown on the Georgetown side of the mouth of Rock Creek on the Robert Brooke map of 1737, as previously mentioned. It appears there also on the William Mayo map of the same year.

To substantiate the fact that there was a ferry from Maryland to Virginia at that point in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, there is the testimony of Benjamin Sebastian in the case of *Carlyle v. Alexander*.<sup>10</sup> He states that he has lived in the area for thirty-eight years or, since the testimony was taken in 1767, since 1725, and "that there was a plain Road from Four Mile Run to the ferry opposite Georgetown" ever since he can remember. He does not designate the ferry by name.

Since on both the maps previously cited, there is a symbol to indicate a house located at the ferry on the Maryland side, it is likely that Magee was a Marylander. No records of Magee have come to light. Public ferries were not regulated in Maryland until the adoption of a State Constitution in 1781<sup>11</sup> so there is no help from the court records there on that score.

One authority states that there was a public landing known as "Saw Pit Landing" on the Georgetown side of Rock Creek as early as 1703.<sup>12</sup> This would be a logical place to which to run a ferry, but surely not by the long diagonal passage from Pimmit Run. The tobacco inspection warehouse there was not established until 1742.

### **Where Was Awbrey's Ferry?**

If Awbrey's ferry was not based at the mouth of Pimmit Run, where was it?

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<sup>9</sup> From 1731 to 1742, the area along the Potomac north of Chopawansick Creek was in the newly created County of Prince William. Fairfax County was created in 1742, covering the land north of the Occoquan.

<sup>10</sup> Fairfax County "Land Records of Long Standing," p. 189 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Taggart, "Old Georgetown," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 11 (1908), p. 170.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

The license of 1738, as mentioned, does not specify the exact location. Again as mentioned, Francis Awbrey owned no land in the Chain Bridge area and would have been unable to devise property there. He did have, among his holdings, land on the river but further up, above and below Goose Creek and up to Point of Rocks.<sup>13</sup> At the time of the issuance of the 1738 ferry license, Francis Awbrey was living in the Leesburg area, according to Fairfax Harrison.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, John Warner's 1737 map of the Northern Neck of Virginia shows a house symbol identified with the name "Capt. Awbrey" above Goose Creek. Thus the "plantation of Francis Awbrey" recited in the license could have referred to this location.

There was another Awbrey holding, further down the river below the Falls. This was a 37.5-acre piece north of the Howson patent that had been bought by John Alexander, plus additional acreage overlapping the Howson-Alexander patent, eighty-six acres all told with river frontage. A survey of the whole Howson patent was made by Daniel Jennings in 1746 in connection with a suit brought in 1742 by the Alexanders because of this interference. The survey, as reproduced in the Fairfax County "First Book of Surveys" shows the relevant parcel with a house on it marked "Capt. Awbrey's," a "Log house" and a "Tob house." That area above the line of the Howson patent would lie within the bounds of the Struttfield patent of September 7, 1709.<sup>15</sup>

Awbrey is said to have claimed that portion by purchase from Struttfield<sup>16</sup> but the Northern Neck Land Book "E," p. 81, shows a grant to John Awbrey on May 29, 1739, for eighty-six acres at that site.

A closer look at the Awbrey wills seems called for. Among other bequests, Francis Awbrey gave to his son John "all that Tract of Land he now lives upon likewise all that Tract of Land at the Falls where Poutney Lives upon except fifty acres where the ferry and ordinary is kept and one hundred acres of Land above Goose Creek which was bought of William Perry." To his son Francis, he gave the tract on which he lived, and to his son Richard "that fifty acres of Land reserved at the falls where the ferry and ordinary is kept . . . likewise that tract of land where Samuel Hull now lives upon Extending from the beginning tree up the River one hundred yards above the ferry Landing and one hundred yards above the said ferry road up to Sinkler [Sinclare] and so joining upon Sinkler down to Clerks run."

"Clerks run," shown as Clarks Branch on modern maps, is *above* the Great Falls. There is no indication that Francis Awbrey owned land below

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<sup>13</sup> Northern Neck Land Books: "B," pp. 106, 166, 202; "C," pp. 30, 102, 185.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William*, p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> Northern Neck Land Book, 3, p. 227.

<sup>16</sup> See testimony in the *Carlyle v. Alexander* suit, Fairfax County, "Land Records of Long Standing."

the Little Falls except inland parcels on Four Mile Run and Pohick Creek. These would have no bearing on a ferry site.

Richard Awbrey must have died before John Awbrey although his will, made January 14, 1743 (O.S.), was not probated until July 19, 1744, or after John's will had been proved. Richard mentions his mother, Frances, and leaves the bulk of his estate to his brother Francis. To his brother John, he leaves "one shilling."

John Awbrey's will was drawn February 5, 1743, (O.S.) and probated May 17, 1744.<sup>17</sup> It mentions "the Tract of Land where I lived on above Goose Creek" of 336 acres, and speaks of a "Tract of Land which fell to me by death of Richard Awbrey on Potowmack River joining to the Land of Thomas Awbrey and Josias Clapham" which he directs be sold.

To his wife Mary Awbrey, he leaves "that Tract of Land where John Woodridge now lives which contains eighty-six acres with all the appurtenances thereunto in anywise belonging for life." This must be the parcel granted in 1739. He mentions that his wife may be with child and provides that when that child is of age he should have the plantation where Richard Poutney lives. He had inherited this from his father whose will places it in the neighborhood of the ferry lot left to Richard Awbrey. John again refers to "land falling to me by the death of Richard Awbrey" in devising to the unborn child should it be a son, property on Four Mile Run.

These repeated references to land John acquired through the death of Richard are obscure in the light of the one shilling bequest in the latter's will. Moreover, Francis Awbrey did not provide for a redistribution of his bequests in the event of the death of his named heirs.

John Awbrey goes on to give to his wife's eldest daughter Hannover the "fifty acres of land which fell to me by the death of Richard Awbrey where the Fferrey and Ordinary is kept" when she reached the age of eighteen. He states "My Will and Desire is That Robert Boggess should take into his care the Fifty Acres of Land before mentioned and Devised to my wife's Daughter Hannover at the Fferrey which fell to me by the Death of Richard Awbrey and to charge my Estate with one half of the expense in keeping the said Ferrey and publick House and to be chargeable himself for the Other half. And my will is That my wife should stay on the Plantation whereon she now is till the fall without any Disturbance to Mr. Boggess but that he may have which House he thinks fitt."<sup>18</sup>

The mystery remains. A reading of Francis' will seems to place the fifty acres with the ferry in the Great Falls area. John's devise of the eighty-six acres to his wife does not include explicit mention of a ferry (one of the

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<sup>17</sup> Fairfax County Will Book "A," p. 60. Richard's will is recorded on p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> An amusing footnote to this clause is in the testimony of Robert Boggess given in the *Carlyle v. Alexander* suit as reported in the "Land Records of Long Standing." He relates that John Awbrey gave him this charge upon his death bed but "in finding the wife of Awbrey aforesaid a bad woman he declined being concerned with the Estate."

“appurtenances”?) but the charge to Boggess seems to imply that there was such an installation there. Were there *two* Awbrey ferries?

The *Journal of the House of Burgesses* entries cited by Harrison report the receipt of a petition of “sundry inhabitants of the County of Fairfax” praying that the public ferry “now established by law *below* the Falls of Patomack River, on the land of *John Awbrey, deceased*” be moved “about Half a Mile higher *up* [emphases supplied] upon the lands of George Mason.” By this time, Mason had acquired the Struttfield and Owsley grants along the river. Note that this ferry is described as “below” not “at” the Falls, possibly to distinguish it from another ferry on the Potomac at the Great Falls. That the petition was granted is apparent from Chapter 16 of the *Acts* of the session which began October 1748<sup>19</sup> for the regulation of ferries which includes one “from the plantation of George Mason opposite to Rock Creek, over to Maryland.”

The ferry moved in 1748 could hardly have been moved *up* to Mason’s land had that ferry been at the Chain Bridge site or at the Great Falls. It is difficult, in any event, to believe that this action was taken by *Richard Awbrey* (as stated by Montague) four years after his will was probated.

### **No Ferry at Pimmit Run**

There are further indications that, whether Awbrey’s ferry was above or below the Falls, there was no ferry running from the mouth of Pimmit Run in the early 1700s. William Boylstone, one of the witnesses in the *Carlyle v. Alexander* suit cited above, testifies that “there was no path leading as the road from Alexandria to the Falls of Potomac now goes [essentially the Glebe Road of today] till within this twelve or thirteen years past.” This was in 1767. If the ferry had been at the Little Falls as early as 1737, would not a road or path have been developed prior to the early 1750s between there and the settlements that became Alexandria? The “plain road” to the ferry, according to Benjamin Sebastian (v.s.) ran quite otherwise.

A statement made by a John Abington before the Governor and Council of Maryland in 1728 shows that the road to Annapolis ran from the “Ferry on Rock Creek” side.<sup>20</sup> No roads are shown on maps of the period running from the Maryland side of the river in the Chain Bridge area.

### **Possible Explanations**

What possible explanation can there be for this confusion?

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, a tenable assumption is that Montague relied on Harrison as the basis for his statement that Lee “en-

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<sup>19</sup> Hening, VI, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Bessie Wilmarth Gahn in “*George Washington’s Headquarters in Georgetown and Colonial Days, Rock Creek to the Falls* (Silver Spring: Press of Westland, 1940), p. 91.

gaged" Awbrey to run a ferry in the Chain Bridge area. Montague surely knew that Awbrey could not have run it from land which he owned at the site because he did not own such land. If there were a ferry then, as Harrison claimed, and that ferry was known as Awbrey's, the only possible conclusion was that Lee had employed Awbrey to run it.

But why did Harrison state that "Magees" ferry as Awbrey's predecessor had run from the mouth of the Pimmit? It is tempting to think that an explanation lies in still another map. The 1746-47 map of the Potomac prepared by Peter Jefferson and Robert Brooke shows McGee's Ferry but in such a way that its location could be interpreted as being higher up the river than it was. The word "McGees" is spread out on the Virginia side of the river; the word "ferry" with the house symbol, on the Maryland side. Dotted lines slant across the river between the two. This device is used by the cartographers to connect other names and exact sites. It is noteworthy that a 1751 revisal of this map, the Fry and Jefferson map, places "Magees" [sic] ferry where it is shown on the earlier Robert Brooke map.

Did Harrison inspect the 1747 rather than the 1737 map? Did he, knowing that Robert Brooke had prepared an earlier map, assume that the two were similar? But it is the 1737 Robert Brooke map which is clearly reproduced in *Landmarks of Old Prince William*.

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Whatever the answer to these riddles, it would appear that no contemporary evidence so far uncovered indicates the existence of a ferry at the Chain Bridge site in the early 1700s. If there was indeed a ferry, unknown to the records, it was neither Magee's nor Awbrey's.