

Robert Howson

Arlington Began with Him

BY TED PULLIAM

But Who Was He?

On October 21, 1669, William Berkeley, Knight, the Royal Governor of the Colony of Virginia, acting on behalf of King Charles II, conveyed by patent 6,000 acres on the west bank of the Potomac to a man named Robert Howson. The property included what is now National Airport, the oldest part of Alexandria, Crystal City, the Pentagon, and Arlington Cemetery. In exchange, Howson transported 120 people to the King's Colony of Virginia.¹

Howson was the first person who patented land in Arlington County whose patent still forms the basis for land titles in Arlington today.² Although Arlington thus began with Howson, little has been written about him. Moreover, much of what has been written for the last 75 years has been wrong.

Sea Captain?

Writers on Arlington and Alexandria history have described Howson with great consistency as a professional seaman of some sort.³ He has been characterized as a "mariner," a "ship's captain," and "the master of the ship that brought these immigrants," among other similar descriptions.⁴ Even his nationality has changed from a "Welsh sea captain" to an "English sea captain."⁵ The implication has been that Howson sailed into Virginia, unloaded his cargo of immigrants, loaded cargo for the return voyage, and then sailed away. However, an examination of Virginia records from his era indicates, as will be shown, that this description is mistaken.

This seaman characterization apparently started in 1924 when the historian Fairfax Harrison wrote in his book *Landmarks of Old Prince William* of Robert Howson as a "Welsh sea captain."⁶ Harrison did not cite an old Virginia record, or any record at all, as a source for his description, even though he had citations for most of his other statements. Why, then, did Harrison settle on the idea of Howson as a sea captain, and how did this idea stick?

At first it might seem obvious that Howson was a sea captain because sea captains were in the business of transporting people. Yet someone with Harrison's knowledge of early Virginia history would have known that although a sea captain carried an immigrant to Virginia, the immigrant's fare

usually was paid for by someone else, someone already in the colony. This was because anyone who paid to transport a person to Virginia earned 50 acres of land in Virginia for each person transported. The goal of virtually all Virginia colonists at that time was to acquire land as quickly as possible, and lots of it. Only then could a man grow a significant amount of tobacco, the main marketable crop, make his fortune, and obtain the prestige that owning land brought in colonial society.⁷ Thus, the actual likelihood was that Howson was a Virginia planter.

However, Harrison also knew that Robert Howson did something unusual for a colonist. Within a month of receiving the patent for the Arlington-Alexandria property, Howson sold it to John Alexander for "Six thousand pounds of Tobacco and cask."⁸ This speedy resale of property might be common practice today (in a sense, Howson was Arlington's first real estate broker and set the standard for those to follow by turning over a vast quantity of property quickly for a neat profit), but it would have been surprising for a typical land-hungry colonist living in Virginia in the 1660s.

A sea captain, however, would have had a different goal. He would have wanted something to take home with him and wanted it quickly. He could not load his ship with land, but he could load it with tobacco. Thus, Howson's being a ship's captain was a plausible explanation for his unusually quick turnover of the land.

In addition, Harrison probably knew that the patent from Governor Berkeley listed the names of the people Howson transported to Virginia. Howson's own name came first, and after it was the notation "4 tymes."⁹ This listing could mean that Howson transported himself into the colony four times. Such a pattern of travel into and out of the colony would fit a sea captain plying his trade. Moreover, it was not unusual for the captain of a ship to obtain a land patent based on transporting himself to the colony, and even some of his sailors, although they had no intention of staying longer than it took to offload cargo.¹⁰

A third factor that could have convinced Harrison and others that Howson was a mariner was the writings of earlier historians. Apparently the earliest historian to mention Howson was the Alexandria historian William Carne. When writing of the Howson patent in the 1860s, Carne refers to "Captain Robert Howson."¹¹ This reference was repeated in a pamphlet published in Alexandria in 1907 celebrating Virginia's Tercentennial.¹² If Harrison knew of these writings, he could have interpreted them to mean that Howson was a ship's captain.

One or all these factors—the quickness of the turnover of the patent, the frequency of Howson's travel in and out of the colony, and the writ-

ings of earlier historians—probably are the basis for Fairfax Harrison’s description. Most writers after Harrison simply may have followed his lead.

Virginia Resident

The document in which Howson transferred the Arlington-Alexandria property to Alexander contains a phrase, however, that raises questions about this characterization. The first line of the document states: “I Robert Howson of the County of Stafford Gent.”¹³

The phrase “of the County of Stafford” suggests residence in Virginia. “Gent” is an abbreviation for “Gentleman.” In 17th century England “Gentleman” was taken seriously and denoted rank between the nobility (duke, earl, etc.) and the yeoman (small farmer). It generally meant that the person described owned landed estates, likely was entitled to display a coat of arms, and did not work with his

hands. In Virginia the term was used more loosely and included, for example, merchants and traders.¹⁴ But was it used so loosely that it could apply, in an official document, to a rough, itinerant sea captain?

Now it is easier to research the background of Robert Howson in Virginia than it was earlier. Transcriptions and abstracts of Virginia county records from the 1600s have been published recently in readily accessible books. What these records demonstrate is that Howson was, at least, a Virginia resident.

Abstracts of order books of Northumberland County record that on the 20th of April 1664, five years before Howson patented the Arlington-Alexandria land from Governor Berkeley, “Mr. Leonard Howson” was certified as having transported to Virginia ten persons, including himself and “Robert Howson.”¹⁵

Actually, the Northumberland record books indicate that Robert Howson was in the colony as early as 1663.¹⁶ Once in the colony, Robert Howson quickly purchased approximately 5,000 acres in Westmoreland County,¹⁷ which became part of Stafford County when Stafford was formed from Westmoreland in 1664.¹⁸ In 1664, Howson was selected to serve on the first vestry of St. Paul’s Parish in this new county and thus was one of Stafford’s principal men.¹⁹

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Stafford County record books contain entries indicating that Howson lived in that county. He had a dispute before the local court about payment for a cow, was tardy in listing his tithables (those members of a household residing in a county, including servants and slaves, upon which a tax was levied²⁰), and in the beginning of 1668, served as one of the justices of the peace for the county, one of the highest local political officials.²¹

The Stafford county record books for the period from the beginning of 1668 through 1689 no longer exist, eliminating a valuable source for Howson's other possible local activities. However, other records indicate that two of his two daughters wed Stafford county men, another indication that Howson made his home in Virginia.²²

Tobacco Merchant

Possibly Howson was both a resident of Stafford County and a ship's captain.²³ As mentioned, the patent from Governor Berkeley suggested that Howson made frequent trips into and out of the colony, behavior typical of the captain of a ship.

This travel pattern, however, also is consistent with another colonial practice. Often planters would send someone on the ship carrying their tobacco to England or Holland as a supercargo to ensure the tobacco was carefully handled. Sometimes a planter himself, acting as a tobacco merchant, would combine tobacco from several planters with his own for shipment, accompany it abroad, and handle its sale or exchange for desired English or Dutch goods.²⁴

This, in fact, was likely Robert Howson's role on his trips abroad. A document notarized in London on August 13, 1668, apparently on one of Howson's trips to England, refers not to "Robert Howson, ship's captain" but "Robert Howson, merchant."²⁵

Other factors also lead to the conclusion that Howson was a traveling tobacco merchant, rather than a ship's captain. As noted earlier, a "Leonard Howson" paid for Robert Howson's first passage to Virginia. The certification that indicated this payment listed Leonard Howson's name first and Robert Howson's second.²⁶ Thus, the two Howsons knew each other, and likely were brothers or maybe cousins.

Leonard Howson quickly became a large planter, justice of the peace, and prominent man in Northumberland County.²⁷ He also became intimate with the powerful Lee family (ancestors of General Robert E. Lee), marrying in 1670 the daughter of Richard Lee, the first of the family in Virginia, a member of the House of Burgesses, and part of Governor Berkeley's influential Council of State.²⁸

There was also a third Howson connected with Leonard and Robert. A "William Howson" was listed, on another certification filed the same day as the Leonard Howson certification, as having been transported to Virginia.²⁹ In 1664, William Howson was in London shipping goods to Leonard Howson in Virginia.³⁰ In 1668, William Howson was in England acting as a shipping agent on behalf of a Westmoreland County planter named Stork for tobacco that Stork earlier consigned to Robert Howson for shipment abroad.³¹ In addition, Leonard Howson named his first son, born sometime after 1670, "William."³²

This connection among the three Howsons would have made possible a very convenient business arrangement. It would have been good business sense for Leonard and Robert Howson, men of stature in several Virginia communities, to collect tobacco from planters in Stafford, Westmoreland, and Northumberland Counties to ship to England or Holland. While Leonard stayed full-time in Virginia, Robert would accompany the shipments abroad to care for them on board, relay messages, and oversee details of the sale or trade, and William in London would arrange for buyers and otherwise continuously administer the English end of the business.

A model for this type of arrangement was established by Richard Lee and his bothers and sons. The Lees owned several ships and followed a practice of having a member of the family reside in Virginia, a member of the family reside in London, and from time to time, a family member travel with the tobacco from Virginia to London or Holland to oversee its handling.³³ Leonard Howson undoubtedly was familiar with this practice, and the Howsons probably adopted it for themselves.

Land Dealer

These records and connections explain Robert Howson's trips away from Virginia. There remains the question of why Howson sold the Arlington-Alexandria land so quickly.

A possible explanation is that he had no need for additional land to raise tobacco, as did his neighbors, because he had income from his tobacco trading. In addition, because he traded in tobacco, tobacco itself might have been more important to him than land. Also, he was not survived by a male heir.³⁴ With no son to inherit, acquiring land may not have been as important to him as it was to other colonists. Finally, Howson simply may have gotten from John Alexander what he considered a good deal for the property.

Alexander would have offered a good deal. He was a Stafford County planter and was interested in land generally (he already owned several

substantial parcels of land in Stafford County).³⁵ In addition, he was interested in the future Arlington-Alexandria property particularly.

Alexander likely learned about the Arlington-Alexandria property six months before he bought it when he surveyed for Lawrence Washington the future Mt. Vernon property nearby.³⁶ It probably happened this way: To get to the Washington property, Alexander would have traveled by water rather than by land, for it was then both difficult and dangerous to reach that property by land. That part of the Potomac and further north was basically wilderness sparsely settled by Europeans, if settled at all. The only land routes leading to it were Indian paths, and the friendship of the Indians was unreliable.³⁷

Having reached the future Mt. Vernon property by boat, it would have been natural for Alexander, a man interested in acquiring property, to sail a little further up the Potomac to see what was there. What he saw, he liked.

Alexander and Howson had known each other for several years. They served together on the St. Paul's Parish vestry in 1664. Alexander was justice of the peace when Howson made occasional appearances before the county court. They even were neighbors.³⁸

When Alexander learned that Howson had accumulated headrights that would allow him to patent the Arlington-Alexandria property Alexander wanted, he and Howson got together—perhaps over the kitchen table at Howson's or Alexander's home—and made a deal.³⁹ Alexander, the planter, got the land; Howson, the tobacco merchant, got the tobacco. Both were satisfied.

Conclusion

Early court records demonstrate that Howson was a resident of Stafford County. His travel pattern is consistent with that of a sea captain, but this pattern, plus his family connections, also points toward his being a traveling tobacco merchant. His quick transferal of the Arlington-Alexandria property to John Alexander, while possibly an indication that he was a ship's captain, is also understandable behavior for Robert Howson, tobacco merchant and neighbor of John Alexander.

A final factor leads to the conclusion that Howson was, in fact, a tobacco merchant and not a sea captain: in the number of entries for Robert Howson in several counties and in the hands of several clerks not once was he referred to as a ship's captain, as "Capt. Howson," or as any type of seaman. Actual seamen were described frequently in the records of that period as what they were: "mariner," "master of the ship," or something similar.⁴⁰ When court records gave Howson a title, it was always "Gentle-

man,” “Mr. Howson,” or in London, “merchant.”⁴¹ It follows, then, that Howson was actually a Virginia resident and tobacco merchant. At the very least, it would be strange now to characterize Howson as a seaman when his contemporaries did not describe him so.

Robert Howson likely would be surprised, and probably a bit offended, to discover that more than 300 years later he was remembered as a rough seaman. Possibly now that more is known about the man with whom Arlington began, he will be recognized as the Virginia tobacco merchant that he was, and perhaps he might feel a little better.

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- ⁴ Smith and Miller, *Seaport Saga*, p. 14; Rose, *Arlington County*, p. 24; Stetson, *Four Mile Run Land Grants*, p. 1.
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- ¹² Alex J. Wedderburn, *Souvenir Virginia Tercentennial: Alexandria Va. Past and Present* ([Alexandria]: n.p., 1907), p. 3.
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³⁹ Alexander had headrights of his own, but they were insufficient for the Howson patent and Alexander had his eye on other property. Less than three weeks before buying the patent from Howson, Alexander patented 1,285 acres using his own headrights. Pippenger, *Northern Neck Proprietor*, pp. 22, 74-75.

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