

THE GLEBE OF FAIRFAX PARISH

By

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In July 1971 the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission placed the Glebe of Fairfax Parish (4527 17th Street, North, Arlington, Virginia) on the Virginia Landmarks Register and nominated it to the National Register of Historic Places. The Commission was unanimous in its judgment that the Glebe richly deserved this recognition.¹

Fairfax Parish was formed in 1765 from that part of Truro Parish (Fairfax County) lying north of Little Hunting Creek. The new parish contained two churches: the original Falls Church, built in 1733 as the upper church of Truro Parish, and a "chapel of ease" in Alexandria.

These two old wooden churches were inadequate to meet the needs of the growing population. On 1 January 1767 the Vestry let contracts for the building of two larger brick churches to replace them. The new Falls Church was dedicated in 1769, but the new church at Alexandria was not completed until 1773. It was located in the woods outside of town, at the head of Cameron Street extended. This church was known simply as the Church at Alexandria until 1814, when it was named Christ's Church.

The first rector of Fairfax Parish was the Reverend Townshend Dade, 1765-1778. The Vestry paid him a salary of 17,280 pounds of tobacco, with an additional allowance of 2,500 pounds because the parish had no glebe—that is, a farm customarily provided for the rector's benefit, on which he normally resided.

The Vestry of Fairfax Parish frequently advertised its desire to acquire a glebe. On 17 May 1770 it met at the home of Daniel Jennings, some 8 miles northwest of Alexandria and 3 miles east of the Falls Church, and agreed to purchase his "plantation," estimated to be somewhat more than 400 acres, at 15 shillings per acre. A survey made soon afterward for the Vestry, as purchasers, showed that the tract contained 516 acres; a survey made 1815 for the Vestry, as vendors, showed that it actually contained 566 acres.²

* Dr. Montague acted for the Arlington County Historical Commission in presenting the case of the Glebe to the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. This article is his presentation to the Commission modified to accord with the judgment of Calder Loth, Architectural Historian, VHLC, on the structural evidence.

¹ James W. Moody, Jr., Executive Director, VHLC, to Ludwell Lee Montague, 21 July 1971.

² Charles O. Paullin, "Virginia's Glebe Near Washington," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, Vol. 42-43 (1941-42), pp. 220-222, 230. Paullin's source was a copy of the Vestry Book of Fairfax Parish made in 1921 and entitled "Vestry Book, Christ Church, Alexandria, Va."

The Rev. Mr. Dade soon complained that Daniel Jennings' residence and outbuildings were inadequate for his dignity and comfort. The Vestry met there on 24 May 1773 and contracted with Benjamin Ray for him to build a new Glebe House and outbuildings for 600 pounds current money (six shillings to the dollar)—which was the cost of the Falls Church in 1767.

The specifications laid down by the Vestry were remarkably detailed. In sum, they provided that the dwelling house should be a 1½ story brick structure with a cellar, 42 by 28 feet in the clear. Provision was made also for an outside kitchen, 20 by 16 feet; a "darey" 12 feet square; a "meet house" of the same size, with a "pigeon roof"; a barn, 32 by 20 feet; a stable, 24 by 16 feet; a corn house, 16 by 10 feet; a hen house of the same size; a "house of office," 8 by 6 feet; and a garden, 100 feet square, enclosed by palings five feet high, "neatly headed."³

The Vestry met in the new Glebe House on 16 June 1775 and accepted the structures that Benjamin Ray had built.⁴

The Reverend David Griffith

The Rev. Mr. Dade resigned in June 1778 and was succeeded by the Reverend David Griffith in February 1779.⁵ The new rector was a remarkable man who deserves to be better remembered than he has been.

David Griffith was born in New York in 1742. In London, at the age of 20, he was made a doctor of medicine. Thereafter he served as the surgeon of a British regiment in Portugal during the last year of the Seven Years War (the French and Indian War in America). He then returned to practice medicine in New York and married there. Within a few years, however, he abandoned medicine to study for the ministry at King's College (now Columbia University). He was ordained by the Bishop of London in 1770 and was sent as a missionary to New Jersey. He found life meager there, invoked the aid of Col. William Byrd III of "Westover", and in December 1771 was called to be Rector of Shelburne Parish, Loudoun County, Virginia.⁶

During the Revolution, until 1779, Griffith served as both surgeon and chaplain of the 3rd Virginia Regiment, at Harlem Heights, Trenton, the Brandywine, Valley Forge, and Monmouth. After the war he was very active in the Society of the Cincinnati, in company with his most distinguished parishioner, General Washington.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-224.

⁴ Letter, Harold J. Spelman to Ludwell Montague, 1 February 1971, giving information from the Vestry Book.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ My information on Griffith was obtained from Prof. Claybrook Griffith of Washington and Lee University, a descendant, and the Rev. William Sydnor, Christ Church, Alexandria, who has written a biography of his distinguished predecessor.

After the war Griffith was also a leader in organizing the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States. He was Secretary of the first general convention of that Church, held in Philadelphia in 1785, and President of the second. In 1786 the first convention of the Church in Virginia elected him to be the first Bishop of Virginia, but could not raise enough money to send him to London to be consecrated. He resigned that election in 1789. He died while attending the third general convention of the Church in 1789 and was buried in the churchyard of Christ Church, Philadelphia. He is memorialized in a stained glass window in that church.

The Rev. David Griffith resided at the Glebe of Fairfax Parish. His successor, the Rev. Bryan Fairfax, did not. He continued to reside at his estate, "Mount Eagle," south of Alexandria.

Bryan Fairfax, newly ordained in 1790, resigned his ministry in 1792.⁷ His successors as rector were the Rev. Thomas Davis, 1792-1806, the Rev. William Gibson, 1807-1811, the Rev. William Meade, 1811-1813, and the Rev. Oliver Norris.⁸

Davis and Gibson lived at the Glebe. The dwelling house burned down in 1808, during Gibson's tenure.

Edmund Jennings Lee and the Title to the Glebe

The Church of England was disestablished in Virginia in 1776, but the same act confirmed the titles of incumbent rectors in their glebes. In 1802, however, the General Assembly provided that upon the death or resignation of the then incumbent rectors, the Overseers of the Poor should take possession of the glebe lands. These Overseers in each county had succeeded to the responsibilities of the colonial parish vestries for the relief of the poor.

In 1811 the Overseers of the Poor of Fairfax County moved to take possession of the Glebe of Fairfax Parish, but the Vestry contested their right to do so. Since 1801 the Glebe had been in Alexandria County of the District of Columbia. The Vestry contended that in 1802 the General Assembly had no authority to legislate with regard to property in the District. The counter-contention was, of course, that in 1770 the Vestry of Fairfax Parish had been an agency of the colonial government; that the Glebe, purchased with the taxpayers' money, had been since then the rightful property of the Commonwealth.

This case was conducted for the Vestry by Edmund Jennings Lee, and for the Overseers by Walter Jones, Lee's nephew by marriage. Lee won a

⁷ Bryan Fairfax was the rather unstable son of Col. William Fairfax of Belvoir, young George Washington's patron. He was a Tory during the Revolution, but continued to reside in Fairfax County and to enjoy the personal friendship of Washington. In 1799 he succeeded to the title of Baron Fairfax of Cameron. Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington*, II, 246, 407-408; V, 132n, 498n.

⁸ Mary G. Powell, *The History of Old Alexandria, Virginia*, pp. 88-89.

favorable decision in the Circuit Court of Alexandria County. Jones appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States. There, in 1814, Lee won again.⁹

Having thus established its title, the Vestry sold the Glebe. The proceeds of that sale were used to build the present tower and steeple of Christ Church and the present iron fence around the churchyard (1818), and also to purchase a rectory in Alexandria (1820).¹⁰

Walter Jones

One of the purchasers in 1815 was Walter Jones, he who had represented the Overseers in the recent litigation. He acquired half of the Glebe land and the ruins of the Glebe house.¹¹

Walter Jones (1776-1861) was a native of Northumberland County and an eminent attorney in Washington. For example, he represented Maryland before the Supreme Court in the famous case of McCulloch versus Maryland. He was United States District Attorney for the District of Columbia, 1804-1821, and afterwards was commanding general of the District of Columbia militia. In 1808 he married Ann Lucinda Lee (1790-1835), a daughter of Charles Lee, Attorney General of the United States under Presidents Washington and Adams. She was a neice of Edmund Jennings Lee and a first cousin of R. E. Lee.¹²

Walter Jones built a 1½ story "mansion house" on his share of the Glebe of Fairfax Parish, to be a summer retreat for his family (to get them out of malarial Washington) and a hunting lodge for himself in winter.¹³ According to tradition, that house, which is the rectangular part of the present Glebe house, was built on a "large part" of the foundations of the colonial Glebe House.¹⁴ That tradition is put in question by the fact that the dimensions of Jones's house (34 by 30 feet) are not identical with the specifications of the Vestry of Fairfax Parish in 1773 (42 by 28 feet). It is possible, however, that the Vestry would have accepted some slight variation from its original specifications, and that Jones did not use the whole length of the original foundations.

The conclusion accepted by the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission is that the present Glebe House was built on the site of the colonial Glebe House, and probably on its foundations. The considerations supporting that conclusion are as follows:

⁹ Paullin, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-228. Edmund Jennings Lee was uncle and guardian of young Robert Edward Lee.

¹⁰ Edmund Jennings Lee, *Lee of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1895), pp. 375-376. In 1815 the Falls Church had no congregation and was not in use as a church. Consequently it did not share in the proceeds.

¹¹ Paullin, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

¹² Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 362-369; *Dictionary of American Biography*.

¹³ Alexandria County Deed Book No. 3, p. 18; Paullin, *op. cit.*, pp. 229.

¹⁴ Frank L. Ball, *Mt. Olivet Methodist, Arlington's Pioneer Church* (Arlington, 1965), p. 144.

(1) The name, "The Glebe," remained attached to Walter Jones's half of the glebe lands, not to the other half acquired by John Mason, suggesting that the site of the colonial Glebe House was on Jones's land.¹⁵

(2) A survey made in 1838 for the division of Mason's half of the glebe lands shows a road called "the Glebe Road" branching from "the Road to the Ferry" (no modern equivalent; it ran diagonally across the County to the ferry at the future site of Rosslyn) and running westward across Mason's land to "the Road to the Falls" (the present Glebe Road.) This Glebe Road of 1838 did not touch "The Glebe," shown as an adjoining property, but a lane branched southward from it to the site of the present Glebe house.¹⁶ The implication is that this lane and the "Glebe Road" eastward from it were originally a road from the colonial Glebe House to the ferry at the site of Rosslyn.

(3) The site of the colonial Glebe House was the choice site on that land in 1773, and would still have been the choice site in 1815. Moreover, some or all of the outbuildings and other improvements pertaining to the colonial Glebe House would still have been present there in 1815 and that consideration would have led Jones to build on that site.¹⁷

(4) In the judgment of Calder Loth, the walls of the present Glebe house were erected early in the 19th Century (say between 1815 and 1820) using previously used bricks (which would have been abundant at the site of the colonial Glebe House). The date of the visible part of the stone foundation is not determinable. It could have been laid in 1773.¹⁸

John Peter Van Ness

Walter Jones was generous and improvident. In 1829 the Bank of the Metropolis foreclosed a deed of trust on his Glebe property and at the ensuing auction it was bid in by John Peter Van Ness, the President of the Bank.¹⁹ He wanted it for the same uses that the Joneses had made of it: as a summer retreat and as a hunting lodge.

Van Ness came to Washington in December 1801, as a Congressman from New York. Within a few months he married Marcia Burnes, a celebrated beauty and heiress. Her father, David Burnes, was a large landholder in the area chosen to be the City of Washington. He sold to the Government the land for Lafayette Park, the White House grounds, and the Ellipse. His home stood where the Pan American Union now stands. In 1816 John Peter Van Ness built there an impressive mansion.

¹⁵ Alexandria County Deed Book 5, p. 372; Deed Book 6, p. 117; Deed Book 141, p. 526.

¹⁶ Alexandria County Deed Book 141, p. 526. Miss Cornelia Rose, Jr., directed me to this survey.

¹⁷ These considerations were suggested by Mrs. Eleanor Lee Templeman.

¹⁸ Calder Loth, at the Glebe, 28 February 1971.

¹⁹ Alexandria County Deed Book 3, pp. 18 and 329.

In 1805 Van Ness gave up his seat in Congress to become a citizen of the District of Columbia. He became President of the Bank of the Metropolis and Mayor of the City of Washington.²⁰

John Peter Van Ness died in 1846 and in 1847 his heirs disposed of his property in Alexandria County.²¹ It was subsequently divided into 80 or 100-acre lots.

Clark Mills

The next notable occupant of Walter Jones's Glebe house was Clark Mills, the sculptor. He acquired the house and 100 acres about 1849 and added the octagon in the early 1850s.

Mills was born in Onondaga County, New York, in 1810. Left an orphan, he ran away from his uncle's home when he was 13, and thereafter made his own way as a farmhand, teamster, laborer on the Erie Canal, apprentice cabinetmaker, and plasterer. At 25, while working in Charleston, S. C., he began to model busts in clay. Several gentlemen were impressed by his talent and proposed to send him to Europe for instruction as a sculptor, but he was too busy filling orders to find time to go. One benefactor did persuade him to go to Washington to see the statuary there. He stopped off in Richmond to see Houdon's Washington. It was the first statue that he had ever seen.

In 1848 Mills was invited to make a small model for an equestrian statue of General Andrew Jackson. Since he had never seen an equestrian statue, he developed his own conception uninfluenced by earlier models: a rearing horse perfectly balanced on his hind hooves. The committee was delighted with it and commissioned him to execute the work. Mills sought a place near Washington where he might establish a studio and bronze foundry, and bought the Glebe for that purpose.²²

It is said that Clark Mills built the octagon, the most striking feature of the present Glebe House, to be his studio. That cannot be. His studio was blown down by a gale and rebuilt;²³ obviously it was a less substantial structure than the brick octagon. But Mills did add the octagon to Walter Jones's rectangular house at some time during the early 1850s, when that architectural form was highly popular.

Mills spent two years developing a full-size plaster model of his equestrian Jackson. Then he had to figure out how to cast it in bronze. No bronze casting of that size had ever been made in America; Mills had to invent the technique.

The equestrian Jackson was dedicated in Lafayette Park in 1853. Imme-

²⁰ Paullin, *op. cit.*, pp. 232-234; Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, p. 188.

²¹ Alexandria County Deed Book 5, p. 372.

²² *Dictionary of American Biography*.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 224.

diately the City of New Orleans ordered a replica, which was delivered in 1856. Congress awarded the sculptor a bonus greater than his original contract, and commissioned him to produce the equestrian Washington that now stands in Washington Circle. It was dedicated in 1860. Mills was also commissioned to cast Crawford's statue of Freedom to surmount the new dome of the Capitol. That work was completed in 1863.

All of these works were done at the Glebe.

Caleb Cushing

In 1870 another distinguished Yankee bought the Glebe House and 100 adjacent acres. He was Caleb Cushing of Massachusetts (1800-1879).²⁴

Cushing was elected to Congress as a Whig, in 1834, but in 1842 he sided with President Tyler against Senator Clay and was read out of the party. Tyler then sent him to negotiate the first U.S. treaty of commerce with China. He learned Chinese for the purpose, thwarted the attempts of the wily Chinese to treat the United States as an inferior power, got the desired treaty, and returned in time to raise a regiment of Massachusetts volunteers for the Mexican War, which was politically unpopular in Massachusetts. In Mexico he became a brigadier general. He had a hand in making Franklin Pierce President of the United States and was Attorney General in his cabinet.

Cushing disapproved of slavery in principle, but was more strongly opposed to Abolitionist agitation, which he saw as intended to disrupt the Union. To the last he strove to avert the Civil War, but, when war came, he supported President Lincoln.

In 1865, perceiving no political future for himself in Massachusetts, he became a Washington lawyer. In 1870 he established his residence at the Glebe, in Virginia, with a view to becoming U.S. Senator from Virginia. He became involved, however, in promoting the Treaty of Washington (for the arbitration of the "Alabama claims") and in serving as senior U.S. counsel during the arbitration at Geneva. In 1872 President Grant nominated him to be Chief Justice of the United States, but he was unjustly attacked as having been sympathetic to secession and the nomination was rejected. Grant then sent him to be Minister to Spain, 1873-1877.²⁵ The teakwood eagle that surmounts the octagon of the Glebe House was a gift to him from "the people of Spain."²⁶

Cushing sold the Glebe in 1878 and retired to Massachusetts, where he died in 1879.

²⁴ Paullin, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; *Dictionary of American Biography*.

²⁶ Templeman, *op. cit.*, p. 188. Her source was the late Senator Frank Ball.

James Willett and Frank Ball

In 1893 James P. Willett, the Postmaster of Washington, bought the property. It was then described as:

. . . that historic estate formerly owned by Caleb Cushing, and containing 100 acres, more or less, and located in Alexandria County, Virginia. This tract of land is improved by a large ten-room dwelling house, with basement, large barn with basement, three tenant houses, large orchard, shade trees and beautiful shrubbery, with magnificent view of the City of Washington.²⁷

In 1918 the property was subdivided as Willett Heights. In 1926 Frank L. Ball bought two acres including the old Glebe House.²⁸ He was a leading lawyer of Arlington County, Commonwealth's Attorney, 1916-1924, and State Senator representing Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, and Prince William, 1924-1932.

In 1968 Arlington County erected an historical marker at the Glebe House, now 4527 17th Street, North, Arlington, Virginia. Its text reads as follows:

THE GLEBE OF FAIRFAX PARISH

The glebe was a 500-acre farm provided for the rector of Fairfax Parish, which included both Christ Church, Alexandria, and the Falls Church. The glebe house, built in 1775, stood here. It burned in 1808 and was rebuilt in 1820, as a hunting lodge; the octagon wing was added about 1850. Distinguished persons who have occupied the house include the Rev. Bryan Fairfax (8th Lord Fairfax), John Peter Van Ness (Mayor of Washington), Clarke Mills (sculptor), Caleb Cushing (first U.S. Minister to China), and Frank Ball (state senator).²⁹

²⁷ Paullin, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

²⁹ The reference to Bryan Fairfax in this text is a regrettable mistake. It is also regrettable that it contains no reference to the Rev. David Griffith.