

THE ARLINGTON CONNECTION

By

Warren Clardy*

My theme comes from a snapshot titled *On The Road, April 1921*, showing two little brothers watching Mom scramble eggs over a Sterno stove for us to eat in style out of a fresh cut cantalope, seated on the running board of our "giant" touring car. I vaguely recall the rutted sandy road surrounded by a scrub pine forest somewhere in Virginia where we would see dull pre-restoration Williamsburg and suffer the interminable hunger pangs of the ferry to a place called Eastern Shore. I definitely remember my father, in his best lawyer manner, explaining how important it was to look for connections in time and place as a way of understanding history.

Today I know that just the year before, Arlington County had been named after the manor house built by George Washington Parke Custis where son-in-law Robert E. Lee lived before it became a Civil War burial ground. The Fall of 1921 had seen Arlington National Cemetery grow in world recognition with the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and a cross river traffic jam, so bad that it launched the replacement of the three old Arlington connections with the present monumental spans such as seen as the Kennedy cortege crossed over.

In addition to the Potomac property which his father purchased prior to his death at Yorktown, Mr. Custis inherited several large plantations from the estate of the first marriage of his grandmother Martha Washington to Daniel Parke Custis. He named his new home "Arlington," after the family ancestral estate on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, which he continued to own for another quarter of a century.¹ It was assumed, even in our Society publication², that the name came from a Henry Bennet, Lord Arlington, in England who, according to Bishop Meade, was a patron of the original Custis.

As also described later, related events in 1956 and 1976, gave me a rationale to begin a special interest in the history of Arlington. The start of an *Arlington Historical Society* gave a forum, and the publication of *Arlington County Virginia — A History*³ a basis, for beginning to develop and share a personal sense of time and place.

C.B. Rose, Jr. in her introduction⁴ to the above history, poses a provocative question, "WHY 'ARLINGTON'?" and in addition to the accepted tradition of a person source begs the issue of a place name in England as the more probable. Work on publicity and speakers bureau for the Society has made me aware that we are not alone in possible interest in the source. My computer revealed that I had neither the ability or affluence to do a total search of place name inventories such as the *National Zip Code Directory*.

However, a preliminary use of discovery sampling, shows the high probability there is no major U.S. city without at least one mention of Arlington in the listing. Even our neighbor Montreal has two. So my purpose now becomes the expanded question — Why so many places called Arlington and is there any time connection? Could it be that our namesake is the original source, or if not, what is?

The wheels were put in motion with the news last fall that out of nowhere developers had started their designs on the isolated shores and wetlands surrounding the site and tomb of the builder of the possible first Arlington in America. With camera in hand I took off to retrace my earlier trip, pausing to picture the homeland of Pocohantas who helped John Smith live to write about his Potomac cruise to Arlington shores in 1608. Across the Pamunkey, it was nice to find that the foundations of the Custis⁵ “White House” could still be found, remembered as the honeymoon place for George and Martha Washington and a refuge for Mrs. Robert E. Lee when she had to flee Civil War Arlington.

After leaving Williamsburg, the highway plunges under water to get to Norfolk, then over and under water for a \$9-seventeen mile dangerous trip to land and another seven miles to the tombs, leaving me just as hungry as when a child. No wonder the developers’ pitch is from the north, saying cross the Delaware Memorial Bridge and head south. It does remind us of the bay and state named after Thomas West, Lord De la Warr, who explored the Eastern Shore, saved the starving Jamestown colony, and served as the first governor of London’s Plantation in the Southern Part of Virginia. The West family eventually obtained land grants in the Northern Virginia area of Arlington County. Our Boston Arlingtons might wonder what would have happened if bad weather had not kept the Plymouth Plantation from its intended destination in the northern part of Virginia.

A brick wall has replaced the iron fence around the tombstones of John Custis II and that of the unhappy John Custis IV great-grandfather of the builder of the second Arlington House. I appeared too late; now only some thirty feet separate the enclosure from three model houses, The Arlington, The Berkeley, and The Custis perched in the middle of a great empty space next to the water. Blank out the models and it could look the same as the early 1600s.

Maj. Gen. John Custis II (1630-1696) was born in Rotterdam, Holland and there is some uncertainty as to when and how he named the original Arlington estate. Some say it was 1650 and we find his sister married in the same area to the son of Gov. Yeardley in 1649. Sufficient to say that⁷ by 1658 he had two successful marriages and acquired vast tracts of land, and by 1676 was important enough for Gov. Berkeley to take the government of Virginia temporarily to Arlington during Bacon’s Rebellion. Back in

Arlington I found there was not enough data to reach a conclusion with several basic sources just not readily available here, such as a book called *Genealogical Gleanings in England* (1901)⁶ The time is ripe for a trip across the ocean.

During the abbreviated dusk to dawn flight I thought of how it had been in Sir Walter Raleigh's time when the defeat of the Armada gave Queen Elizabeth I the power to project and protect English colonies in America. Our planned visit to the nautical exhibits at Greenwich would show how some of it happened. How fortunate that Elderhostel had a three university week — each package covering Elizabethan London, Finding Your Ancestors, and English Country Homes, with lectures, libraries, and tours to match. The background from the courses proved to be of great assistance in reaching some brief conclusions between a mass of generalized and specific information.

My ambitious plan to do everything in a short time at the Library of the British Museum was thwarted by the librarian, who felt that such research could be done better at other places saving their resources for the serious PhD. Then they let me spend a half day copying out of books in their Bookshop, where I discovered the multiplicity of Arlington places in England and clues to the pro and con of naming a place in honor of the Earl of Arlington.

I considered renting a car to get pictures of the various Arlingtons, but the sight of a rush hour traffic roundabout at the foot of Big Ben convinced me life was too sweet to drive on the “wrong” side of the street. Since two places had become National Trust properties, I started walking, past Westminster Abbey and the revolving Scotland Yard sign, to the National Trust headquarters at the edge of Buckingham Palace.

Yes, they could sell me some pictures and give free advice about coordinating my itinerary and agenda, and I was told not to worry about being away from resources. I would find among ancestor materials at the University of Strathclyde references needed for the person name search. At the University of Keele, in the industrial heartland, the specialized library for the Department of Geography provided much of the information on Arlington places, present and past.

Back to the National Trust — two interesting developments arose from my visit. First, they expressed surprise that I was surprised there was more than one Arlington in England, since I had known there were many in the States. Had I given any thought, they asked, to some simple way of sharing the information? — I am still thinking. The other development resulted from a finding that *Genealogical Gleanings in England* was actually an American publication and the author had also done a book on the roots of the Washington family.⁸ So try the library at Mt. Vernon. Meanwhile, did I

know about the preservation work at Sulgrave Manor where the American and British flags fly jointly in honor of the George Washington connection, Sulgrave near Banbury and the Arlington near Bibury are as close to Oxford as John Washington and John Custis were to the Jamestown area when they came over to Virginia in the mid 1600s.

So much for getting ready to gather data. We departed Euston Station, London for Glasgow — over 400 miles in five hours to set the pace for the next two weeks. As expected, more information was collected than needed, so assuming most readers appreciate brevity, it is time to attempt some conclusions.

First, on the original question, “WHY ‘ARLINGTON’?”⁹ was Eastern Shore Arlington named for a friend or family? Rose leaned in the right direction and an analysis in terms of time and place should settle the matter. In effect, she gives three arguments why Custis and Bennet did not appear to have been in sufficient contact at the same time or place.

- a. Custis “was born in the Netherlands and was in Virginia in the early 1650s” — Bennet “did not go to the Netherlands until after the death of King Charles I in 1649,” leaving little time for association.

Actually, Bennet¹⁰ fought briefly at the start of the Civil War after receiving an M.A. at Oxford (1642). He then travelled abroad in France and Italy, then back to France, after Charles I was beheaded (1649), for service with the royal family in exile including work in Spain, returning to England only after the Restoration in 1660. Custis was in Rotterdam; the royal family was in residence in Flanders or France.

- b. “Bennett was not knighted until 1657 and would not have been a “patron” of much value prior to that time.” — “Other than Bishop Meade’s statement, no record has yet been uncovered to show what form his “patronage” of Custis took.”

The Restoration did not take place until 1660 and even then plain Sir Bennet remained in Madrid for a time. It was 1663 before he was made Lord (Baron) of Arlington (after his birthplace Harlington, Middlesex) then Earl and raised (1672) to Viscount Thetford of Suffolk where his big house Euston was located. The same year his only child Isabella was married to Henry, Earl of Euston and Duke of Grafton, the son of Charles II and Lady Castlemaine. His public service was marked by devotion to the king and perhaps, because of this, he did not appear to keep many friends and only escaped impeachment by the House of Commons (1674) by a vote of 166-127. From then on his influence declined and he died in 1685.

As described earlier Custis “had it made” by 1658 and was in a position to help rather than need help. There had been little interference from overseas

as long as money kept coming, and “Cromwell accorded even more self government than the king.”¹¹ In my opinion, there was one hitch: birth in Rotterdam could be a problem as Anglo-Dutch hostilities occurred and it deprived him of the newly reinforced rights of being an Englishman in the colonies. Surely, when he applied for naturalization that year he would be following the same desire shown in naming his house Arlington, that of strengthening the ties with his family roots near Bibury, England. There would not even be a Lord Arlington until five years later. We can excuse Meade for jumping to what seemed a logical connection but we must excise his assumption of patronage when there was neither the opportunity or necessity. Lord Arlington was not the source of the name for the Custis manor or the cemetery and county which followed.

Before searching for the first Arlington let us go back to modern times briefly to discuss why there are cities, towns, and even more streets of this name sprinkled over the country.

All of us can remember somehow being involved in the choice of a baby name — it is not easy to find the most appropriate — the *Best*. All kinds of books and lists are consulted, selections made and evaluated and criteria argued. Developers and governments have the same throes. There is maximum opportunity for innovation — so many ways of combining letters but why risk their money or votes on a possible loser — the tendency is to go with what works. Selective factors include sound and image or association, plus for streets, certain alphabetical and syllable factors. Sound is nice but association controls — a short street could use “Nero” but even though a modern namesake makes better music, we find zero Nero. Arlington, on all factors, is among those names that rise like cream to the top. Someday it may even be practical to measure how the use expanded with increased exposure at such dates as 1676, 1804, 1865, 1921, and 1963. It would be nice to think that all use in America came via this county from the oldest source on the Eastern Shore. However, certain alpha sequence makes it obvious that some names came from a set of persons such as the streets in Boston where, starting from the Commons going west, we find Arlington, Berkeley, Clarendon, et seq. in historical association. (Incidentally, the single person-place problem connection on naming our Clarendon subdivision¹² only needed a quick look at the context on a Boston map for resolution.) There could even be a third source from an Arlington in Devon, north of where the Plymouth Colony originated. This means that we must carry at least three threads back to England.

The final phase starts with finding a way to determine if all these Arlingtons have a common source. First, to explain and identify each:

a. Arlington/Custis — our story picks up with Edmund Custis (b1570) married to the daughter of “John Smithier of Arlington in the parish of

Buybury.” This Arlington and adjacent Bibury with landmark Arlington Mill and Row are on A 433 just NE of Cirencester which traces back to Roman times. Out of this came the John Custis businessman who travelled from Rotterdam to Virginia and back, father of the John Custis, first Arlington Manor builder. The pictures from the National Trust show about ten restored stone cottages joined in a row and a plaque saying that they were built in the 14th century as a wool store and converted to cottages for weavers in the 17th century when it became a cloth mill.

b. Arlington/Bennet — Actually still shown beginning with an “H” on the M-4 big highway west out of London. Bennet (b1620) was educated at Oxford to be “parson of Harlington.” His ecclesiastic grandfather lived nearby and the parish register started in 1540. A distant E. Harling started in 1544.

c. Arlington/Devon — Up the road from Barnstable in the west of England, is Arlington Court, a National Trust property with many exhibits including Arlington Mill Farm. Their booklet says John Chichester came west from Sussex in 1384 and married a Raleigh, who brought as her dowry the Arlington Estate and much else. It is not known whether the name came with him or not, since there is an Arlington today in Sussex near London. Not too far away at Greenwich is the Gypsy Moth in which a descendent sailed the first single passage around the world.

At this point with the antiquity of the names, it is impractical to go back through the maps, layer by layer, so to cut time we go from geographical name to etymological noun tracing. Suffix, roots etc. — a piece of cake — I would be an instant expert but also I finally remembered my old shop teacher’s dictum: when all else fails, read the instructions. Arlington resembles well researched Washington which can be reduced to -ton meaning town, -ing meaning belonging to, leaving a root Wash, which I spotted as coming from “The Wash” a big bay north of Sulgrave Manor. Good theory, but wrong answer, which is another story.¹³

Variations such as Arlingham and Arlingford suggested start with Arling- for clues. A bigger dictionary finally had the obsolete noun *arling*, which after some gibberish the dictionary said “a clod-splitter 1753” and like the real estate man, I rang up ‘No Sale.’

Next, maybe the “H” in Harlington was significant at the beginning, so searching the root Harl- showed flax or fibers, which in my notebook, became town belonging to fibers, or a wool mill. True, the Custis and Devon villages had such a mill and England was really pushing its wool surplus — merchants could get rich convincing Indians to wear blankets and selling their useless furs to Europe. But the “H” kept it from applying to all Arlingtons and Darlington would have to be explained so up went another ‘No Sale.’

Finally, I read all the fine print preface to a big dictionary¹⁴ and a light began to glimmer. The term-*ling* could mean the same as *-ing*, as in earthling, belonging to earth, and a “clod-splitter 1753,” was just the last noted usage of an obsolete term. More important, the gibberish became intelligible when I took the time to look at symbols, determine their meanings and compare many sources.

Among Anglo-Saxon meaning¹⁵, *Ar-* is “. . .honour, worth, dignity, glory. . .” Other dictionaries also gave *Ar-* as root for a high place as in arch and archduke. Things begin to look better, but while this might be fit for a cemetery it still does not fit Arlington generally.

Now back for a new look at *arling*. In brief, the symbols read from OE (Old English) *eoroling* and L (Latin) *agricola*; *f.earoe*, earth . . . *eoroling* means farmer and another spelling, *yroling*, means ploughing or growing crops. The general sense is that of producing from the earth.

We have tried to go beyond whether the name source was person or place, to the basic significance of the word, only to find there still are two choices — almost a matter of life or death as illustrated by the history of the area. Custis began his plantation as a living showplace in memory of George Washington, supported by his grandmother’s estates including the Eastern Shore Arlington. The U.S. Government sought to make the high ground into a cemetery. At first most burials were unknowns and for a period it almost became a potters field for those who could not afford shipment home. Later it became *the* place to be buried until at one time it was feared the cemetery would take over most of Arlington County. By a touch of irony, it did take over the low ground used by the government for the Arlington Experimental Farm to develop better ways of growing crops.

Today it appears that both meanings can exist in harmony. In general, the larger Arlington means a green vibrant growing place for the living.

As for the cemetery, it would be most appropriate to think of a special Arlington Connection of several meanings in one word. Combine the two meanings of *Ar-*with the basic root *Arl-*(earth) plus *-aern*(house) and we get ‘grave’ in the highest place of glory, respect, and dignity.

Enough of connections, subtle or direct. While my theories are useful only until you find better, I hope they have given you a greater appreciation of Arlington. The times and places are now yours to expand and enjoy.

My apologies for intermingling personal life in this search — but the theme has an appropriate conclusion. Aside from the educational value, I did find that my parents had their own purposes in 1921 — Dad looking for more on his Confederate father who survived the Crater blast at Petersburg — Mom for some northern ancestor at the start of William & Mary. Now I would have many more questions but they are gone — Dad in 1959 and Mom in 1976.

By a twist of fate they are buried at the edge of Arlington amphitheater — across from the entrance to the Tomb of the Unknowns.

Now, like thousands of others, my Arlington connection is permanent.

Notes and References

- *Warren Clardy — Past president of the Arlington Historical Society and retired management engineer now pursues the dual hobbies of our Speakers Bureau and teaching his grandchildren about science.
- ¹Nora Miller Turman, "The Eastern Shore of Virginia," (Onancock, Virginia, *Eastern Shore News*, 1964) p. 116.
- ²Arlington Historical Society, *Why Do We Call It?* (Special Publication #1, 1960) p. 1.
- ³Cornelia Bruere Rose, *Arlington County, Virginia — A History*, (Arlington Historical Society, 1960).
- ⁴*Ibid.* pp. 3, 4.
- ⁵Robert A. Lancaster, *Historic Virginia Homes and Churches* (Spartanburg, South Carolina: Reprint Company, 1973) p. 266.
- ⁶Henry F. Waters, *Genealogical Gleanings in England*, (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1901) Vol. 1, p. 700.
- ⁷Elmer Thomas Crowson, *Life As Revealed Through Early American Court Records* (1981).
- ⁸Henry F. Waters, *English Ancestry of George Washington* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1889).
- ⁹Rose, pp. 3, 4 and footnote references.
- ¹⁰*National Bibliography*, (England: Oxford University Press, 1908) Vol. 1, pp. 231, 235.
- ¹¹Samuel Eliot Morison, *Oxford History of the American People*, (New York: Mentor, 1972) p. 131.
- ¹²Dorothea E. Abbott, "The Roots of Clarendon" (*Arlington Historical Magazine*, 1986) pp. 52, 53.
- ¹³Charles Arthur Hoppin, *The Washington Ancestry* (Greenfield, Ohio: Privately Printed, 1932).
- ¹⁴*The English Language*, *Webster New World Dictionary of the American Language*, (1966) pp. xxvii et seq.
- ¹⁵J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th Edition, (Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 23.
- Credit is also given to Bishop William Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1966) Originally published in Philadelphia, 1857.