

## A LOOK AT JOHN BALL'S INVENTORY, 1767

By

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The Arlington Historical Society has a treasure in the 1750 house of John Ball, located in the Glencarlyn area of Arlington, Virginia. We also have a bonus in knowing what was in his house, for the inventory taken after his death in December 1766 still exists. This inventory is in the records of Fairfax County, which at that time included the area that is now Arlington County. Inventories such as this help shed light on the lives of the men and women who settled this land over 200 years ago.

John Ball had been granted a patent of 166 acres of land by Lord Fairfax in 1742<sup>1</sup> and is believed to have built his house shortly thereafter. He died in 1766, leaving a wife and five daughters.<sup>2</sup>

When a person died in Virginia, the county court appointed a pair or a trio of citizens to go to the house of the deceased in order to inventory and appraise his or her personal property. Appraisers were generally peers and neighbors, and could be from any level of society; in fact one of the appraisers of Ball's estate signed the inventory with his mark, indicative of his inability to write. Anna Hawley, in her study of Surry County, Virginia appraisers,<sup>3</sup> found that most appraisers did only one or two inventories, but a few men were called on over and over. For this paper a study was made of the twenty inventories recorded in Fairfax over a three-year period between June 1766 and May 1769. Sixty-three inventory takers are listed; three served three times, seven served twice, and forty served only once.<sup>4</sup> None of the three men who did Ball's inventory are listed as serving again in this period. The three were: John Hurst, Joseph Moxley, and James Green.<sup>5</sup> John Hurst was a leaseholder on property adjacent to John Ball's; Joseph Moxley was a tithable (taxpayer), possibly a tenant,<sup>6</sup> and at this time we do not find any other reference to James Green.

Even though many different people participated in taking these inventories, there does seem to have been a system which all appraisers generally followed. They categorized items in certain ways<sup>7</sup>: a) composition — what the object was made of. Some materials were more valuable than others; for example, silver and brass as opposed to tin and iron. b) condition — whether it was old or new, broken or whole. Practically all of John Ball's inventory is noted as "old," which of course put a lesser value on his property. c) function — classification of containers, for example, by what they held. Vessels would be described as cider cask, water tub, wine glass, etc. d) manner of construction; i.e. a joint stool. Of course all four of these consid-

erations were highly interrelated. A brass lock might be very good, or it might be a broken brass lock, which would reduce its value. When the appraisers turned in the inventory, it still had to pass the court's approval for accuracy, so apparently a large number of people had a good estimate of the worth of inventory items.<sup>8</sup>

For help in reading John Ball's Inventory, note that "to" before each item means "for:" "For an old smooth gun: 15 shillings." The value is given beside each item on a line, and then each line is totaled on the right in three columns: English pounds, shillings, and pence. 20 shillings made one pound, and 12 pence made one shilling. The symbol used for pounds is "£"; for shillings is "/"; and for pence is "d." (The spelling is as in the original.)

\* \* \* \* \*

### John Ball's Inventory<sup>9</sup>

"In obedience to an order of Fairfax Court dated December 1766, we the subscribers being first sworn before a Justice, have inventoried and apraised the estate of John Ball deceased as followeth:

	£	/	d.
To an old smooth gun, 15/, an old foot addz, old chisel, gauge and rasp 3/6	0	18	6
To one shugar box 8/, two old books 4/	0	12	0
To 3 old casks and a brass lock	0	9	6
To an old tenant saw 5/, to 6 sheep 36/	2	1	0
To 2 cows 5£, 2 heifers 4£, 2 earlings 20/	10	0	0
To 1 grey mare 2£, two sows & 12 piggs 25/	3	5	0
To 1 pair of spectacles 9P, to 1 woolen wheel 5/	0	5	9
To 1 box iron & heaters 4/, parcel of old books 4/	0	8	0
To old fire tongs 1/6 an old chisel, a small case bottle, an old fiddle, 2 old hooks	0	9	6
To an old oval table 5/, old looking glass 10/	0	15	0
To old bed 50/, one old table 6/	2	16	0
To 1 old table 2/, to an old chest 3/6	0	5	6
To 5 yds woolen cloth 50/, to 1 new coat 55/	5	5	0
To 1 old hat 7/, old coat jacket & britches & old shoes 30/, an old smooth bore gun 25/	3	2	0
To 2 old linnen wheels 16/, some old wooden truck 1/ two old bed hides 12/6	1	9	6
To 1 old bed, bedstead & hide 60/; 10 lbs new feathers 20/	4	0	0
To one-half doz best plates 10/	0	10	0
To 10 lbs of old plate 11/3, to old plate 9/	1	0	3

To one-half doz delph plates 3/, to 4 earthen plate 2/	0	5	0
To 11 knives & 12 forks 8/, To 4 earthen pans 2/	0	10	0
To one stone jugg 2/, To a parcel of earthenware 3/	0	5	0
To 5 bottles & vial 1/6, to 2 old tin funnels 1/6	0	3	0
To 1 still, tub & worm 20£, to a parcel of old iron 8/	20	8	0
To 3 old axes 7/6, to a parcel of old iron 6/	0	13	6
To 3 old hand saws & a brass lock 16/	0	16	0
To a parcel of old plains 14/, to a parcel of old lumber 2/6	0	16	6
To 2 old bells 5/, an old saddle & bridle 12/6	0	17	6
To 3 old hoes 2/, old plough & stock 8/	0	10	0
To a parcel of old water vessels 6/, 7 old casks 21/	1	7	0
To 11 old casks 22/, to 2 old broken pots & hooks, an old pan 7/, to a gun stock 2/6	1	11	6
To 1 pair cards 2/, to 1 bread tray 2/	0	4	0
To a flax brake 3/, to 4 bee hives 10/	0	13	0
To 3 syder troughs 7/6, to a grinding stone 4/	0	11	6
To a broken pair of mill stones 30/	1	10	0
To a trough and other lumber	0	4	0
To a pair of new mill stones, frog & spindle	8	0	0
To some old mill iron 10/	0	10	0
To 10 geese 15/, to 4 old razor hone & pocket book 2/6	0	17	6
	78	11	0

his  
(signed) Joseph Moxley, John Hurst, James I Green  
mark

At a court held for the County of Fairfax 16 March 1767, this inventory was returned and ordered to be recorded. Teste: J. Wagoner, Clerk of Court.

\* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*

Some interpretation or clarification of the uses of various items listed in the inventory might be useful here:<sup>10</sup>

- “best plate” was probably pewter.
- “bed” usually referred to the mattress; “bedstead” to the frame.
- “pocket book” was a man’s wallet with a flap. Williamsburg has some examples of these in their collection.
- “parcels of lumber” could have included items such as benches and stools, as well as planks of lumber.
- ceramics were counted by number, but plate by weight, i.e. “10 lbs. of old plate.”
- “rasp” was used for filing wood.

- “gauge” was a measuring device.
- “foot adz” was used for smoothing, trimming, flattening timber.
- “tenant saw” cut tenons for furniture making (dovetailing); modern spelling would be “tenon saw”.
- “worm” was probably a screw device for crushing ingredients for the still.
- “frog & spindle” — the spindle was the piece that went through the hole in the millstone; the frog held it.
- “flax brake” broke the husks around the flax fibers.
- “pair of cards” was used to brush wool so the fibers all ran in one direction.
- “razor’s hone” — leather strap for sharpening razors.
- “smooth gun” or “smooth bore gun” — gun that does not have a rifled bore.
- “box iron and heaters” — for pressing clothes.
- “wooden truck” — meant wooden stuff, a parcel of wooden things.

As one studies John Ball’s inventory, about nine main categories of items emerge: **LIVESTOCK** — sheep, cows, heifers, yearlings, a mare, sows, pigs, geese, and bee hives. **MILL STOCK** — broken millstones, new millstones, frog & spindle, grinding stone, gauge, casks, mill iron. **TOOLS & CARPENTRY** — foot adz, chisel, rasp, tenon saw, hand saws, planes, parcels of lumber, wooden truck. **DISTILLERY ITEMS** — still, tub & worm, cider troughs, tin funnels, bottles & vial, parcel of vessels. **FARM IMPLEMENTS** — plough and stock, bells, guns, saddle & bridle, axes, hoes. **FURNITURE AND BEDDING** — tables, chests, 1 bedstead, 2 beds, 3 bed hides, 10 lbs new feathers. **WEAVING & CLOTH** — 2 linen wheels, 1 woolen wheel, 5 yds woolen cloth, flax brake, pair of cards, new coat, old hat, coat jacket, britches. **COOKING & EATING** — sugar box, case bottle, best plates, old plates, delft plates, earthen plates and pans, parcel of earthen ware, broken pots and hooks, knives and forks, bread tray, stone jug. **HOUSEHOLD AND PERSONAL** — brass locks, iron, fire tongs, razor’s hone, books, shoes, looking glass, pocket book, fiddle, spectacles.

The items of most worth were the still, livestock, and millstones. At the Ball house today there remains a broken millstone, and at the Museum we have a whole millstone from the property. These two may be the ones referred to in this inventory. Supporting this supposition is that after the sale of John Ball’s property in 1769, the records show that three items did not sell: the millstones, the irons, and a gun.<sup>11</sup> The sale of his inventory brought almost the exact amount of the appraisal: 72 lbs, 14 shillings, and 5 pence, compared to the appraised value of 78 lbs, 11 shillings, 0 pence.

It’s important to note that inventories in Virginia at this time did not include land, but dealt only with personal property.<sup>12</sup> Since wealth in Virginia was concentrated in land, one cannot measure or compare the wealth of people at that time by their inventories alone. There were 250 landowners in Fairfax County in 1760 (not including lot owners in the towns of Alexandria

and Colchester), but there were also as many citizens who rented their land, either as leaseholders or as tenants.<sup>13</sup> Personal inventories of two deceased persons might be quite similar in value, but their ultimate worth would be quite different if one owned land and the other only worked land as a tenant. John Ball's final worth after his personal property and land were sold, his debts and funeral expense paid, and monies due him were collected, was 208 lbs, 16 shillings, and 2½ pence.<sup>14</sup>

In his will John Ball directed that his land be sold, along with his personal property, for the benefit of his wife and five daughters. His wife went into court<sup>15</sup> and gave up her rights under his will in order to exercise her dower right to continue to live on one-third of the land. Since her dower right was for life, she continued to live on the land even after it was sold to William Carlin in 1772. In fact, Elizabeth Ball lived on the land a long time — she was still there in 1792!<sup>16</sup> It is not clear where she lived; whether she lived in the house, while Carlin simply owned and worked the land, or whether some small dwelling was provided for her to live in.

Wealth lay not in land, but also in the human labor used to work the land.<sup>17</sup> Slaves counted heavily in an inventory of one who owned them. A slaveowner's inventory might be two or three times larger in value than that of John Ball, who did not own slaves, but might be actually less in goods and items, once the value of the slaves is subtracted from the inventory.

To illustrate this point, the chart below includes the twenty Fairfax inventories<sup>18</sup> of the three year period 1766-1769. It gives the inventory value and then shows how much an inventory decreased when the slaves were taken out. The chart also shows who owned land "O"; leased land "L"; and was a tenant "T".

Date	Name	O L, T	Inventory Value			Owned Slaves	Value after Slaves out		
			£	/	d.		£	/	d.
Ju 66	David Piper	T	185	9	3	3	80	9	3
Ju 66	John Ashford	O	279	4	2	5	139	4	2
Au 66	Futerall Hall	?	28	4	3	0	28	4	3
Oc 66	Jacob Gardenshire	O	27	6	0	0	27	6	0
No 66	James Hurst	?	4	13	10	0	4	13	10
De 66	Josias Mankin	?	44	4	3	1	19	4	3
Ma 67	Sarah Simpson	?	159	13	0	?	?		
Ma 67	John Ball	O	78	11	0	0	78	11	0
My 67	George Johnston	O	1554	10	3	20	864	10	3
Ap 68	Benjamin Grayson	O	178	7	9	2	81	7	9
My 68	French Mason	O	139	4	7	0	139	4	7
My 68	John Hollis	L	22	17	7	0	22	17	7

My 68	Alexander Mills	?	70	4	3	1	45	4	3
Jl 68	Thomas Wren	L	376	0	0	8	84	0	0
Au 68	James King	?	26	2	7	0	26	2	7
Au 68	John Sheredine	L	241	7	3	3	121	7	3
Se 68	William Donaldson	L	67	10	10	0	67	10	10
No 68	Timothy Lines	?	2	8	6	0	2	8	6
Fe 69	Robert Thomas	T	111	3	3	2	57	3	3
My 69	William Frizell	T	27	16	7	0	27	16	7

Of these twenty inventories, nine are of greater value than Ball's; but when the value of the slaves is removed, only five are significantly larger, while five are about the same as his, and nine are lower in value. The three inventories that are markedly different from the others are the two that are so low (Hurst and Lines) and the very high one of George Johnston. His inventory had paintings, including six Hogarth prints, gilt frames, maps, marble tables, Wilton carpets, a punch bowl and ladle, curtains, and silver and gold.

Ball's inventory also did not include produce, or monies or goods owed him by others. We find the accounting of his tobacco and debts owed to him and by him in the final settlement after his land was sold.<sup>19</sup> One reason produce was not in an inventory was that an administrator for the will could feed the deceased's family on crops from the land.<sup>20</sup> Thus produce could not be included in an inventory, since it was being consumed until the final settlement of the estate.

Other items not inventoried were his wife's and daughters' clothing. Their kitchen equipment and the spinning equipment which the women used were inventoried as belonging to Ball, but apparently their clothes belonged to them personally. Ball's own clothes were a part of his inventory.

There were no rugs or curtains in his inventory, and this is quite in keeping with what we are learning about how people lived then, particularly in the small typical one-room-and-loft house that the Balls had built. A study made on early house interiors<sup>21</sup> found that in 1775, when Philadelphia was the largest city in America, floor coverings appeared in less than three percent of the inventories. A researcher on another study<sup>22</sup> found that small early homes such as Ball's were absolutely basic and strictly utilitarian. Standard equipment for a middling planter was one feather bed, a chest, cooking pot, mortar and pestle, an axe, some knives, a few wooden dishes, some spoons, and containers for storing crops. Stools and benches were not standard, nor were forks, sheets, skillets, lamps, or candles. John Ball's inventory did not include chairs, soap, candles, or lamps, but on the other hand he did have forks and knives and a looking glass! With five daughters, he no doubt had to have the last item. Again, apparently quite typically, he owned only

a small amount of furniture. In reading other inventories of this time, one finds the same scarcity of furniture.

Comparison of Furniture Listed in Fifteen of the Inventories

	Oval					
	Table	Table	Chest	Desk	Bed	Chair
Ball	1	2	3	0	3	0
Those close in inventory value to Ball:						
Piper	1	0	1	0	3	4
Thomas	0	2	5	0	4	9
Donaldson	1	0	3	0	2	0
Wren	1	3	7	0	7	0
Those with less inventory than Ball:						
Mills	1	0	2	0	3	0
King	0	1	1	0	3	1
Hall	0	0	1	0	2	2
Frizzel	0	0	3	1	3	0
Hollis	0	1	2	0	1	0
Mankin	1	1	1	0	1	4
Those with greater inventory value than Ball:						
*Mason	1	2	2	0	2	6
Ashford	0	4	3	1	1	7
Simpson	0	2	1	1	3	10

Except for the chairs, Mason's, Ashford's, and Simpson's inventories did not differ widely from others of lesser value. Their inventories point toward the same lifestyle with livestock, tools of a trade, farm implements, and wooden and earthen kitchenware.

Because John Ball's house is small by today's standards, and roughly built, we have tended to think of him as a poor yeoman farmer. C.B. Rose referred to his "meager existence,"<sup>23</sup> but more and more research indicates that his house was typical of how early 18th century planters lived. Dell Upton states that even the more wealthy planters lived in such houses.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, when we first read Ball's inventory it sounds poor — he had so little furniture, not even a chair. But again, when we compare his inventory with others of the period, he was rather typical and certainly had the necessities for a comparatively comfortable life.

In fact, one is struck in reading Ball's inventory with how completely self-sufficient he and his family were. He had axes to cut down the trees and clear his land, and tools with which to build his house; he even had special tools such as the tenon saw with which to make some furniture. He had cows for milk and beef, pigs for pork and bacon, sheep for wool for

clothes, geese for feathers for his beds, and bees for honey for his bread. He ran a mill and ground his wheat or corn into meal; he had a distillery for strong drink, and a mare for transportation and for plowing. He had guns for hunting and protection, farm tools to tend his land, linen and woolen wheels for spinning, bed hides for warmth, and a variety of cooking and eating utensils. And after a hard day's work, he had his books, spectacles, and even a fiddle, not to mention the pocket book in which to keep his money.

Looking at John Ball's inventory gives us clues and information about the way he lived, but much research remains to be done. This article was intended to present the inventory, to describe how inventories were conducted, to introduce some concepts about the inventory, and to present other inventories of the period to better understand how these 18th century people lived. To have John Ball's inventory is indeed a treasure for us today, just as his house is a treasure.

### Notes and References

\*Martha Beggs Orth is a Past President of the Arlington Historical Society, and is currently chairman of the Ball-Sellers House Committee. She is a previous contributor to the *Magazine*.

<sup>1</sup>Northern Neck Land Book F-57, Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia.

<sup>2</sup>Fairfax County Will Book B-1, p. 422.

<sup>3</sup>Anna L. Hawley, "The Meaning of Absence; Household Inventories in Surry County, Virginia, 1690-1715," article in *Early America Probate Inventories*, the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife (Boston University, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>Fairfax County Will Book B-1 and Will Book C.

<sup>5</sup>John Ball's Inventory, Fairfax County Will Book B-1, p. 437.

<sup>6</sup>Beth Mitchell, *Fairfax County, Virginia in 1760, An Interpretive Historic Map* (Fairfax, VA: Office of Comprehensive Planning, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>Mary C. Beaudry, "Worth Its Weight in Iron: Categories of Material Culture in Early Virginia Probate Inventories," *Archaeological Society of Virginia Quarterly Bulletin*, Vol. 33, #1, September 1978.

<sup>8</sup>Robert F. Trent, "Matching Inventory Terms and Period Furnishings," in *Early America Probate Inventories*.

<sup>9</sup>Fairfax County Will Book B-1, p. 437.

<sup>10</sup>Conversations with Betty Leviner and Jan Gilliam, Williamsburg Department of Collections; Donald J. Orth, Arlington, Virginia; and Oscar Fitzgerald, Alexandria, Virginia.

<sup>11</sup>Fairfax County Will Book C, p. 137.

<sup>12</sup>Harold B. Gill, Jr. and George M. Curtis, III, "Virginia's Colonial Probate Policies and the Preconditions for Economic History," *Virginia Magazine of History*, Vol. 87, 1979.

<sup>13</sup>Mitchell, *Fairfax County, Virginia in 1760*.

<sup>14</sup>Fairfax County Will Book C, p. 137.

<sup>15</sup>Fairfax County Will Book B-1, p. 423.

<sup>16</sup>Charles Stetson, *Four Mile Run Land Grants*, chapter on The Ball Patents (Arlington, Virginia, 1935).

<sup>17</sup>Russell R. Menard, Lois Green Carr, and Lorna S. Walsh, "A Small Planter's Profits: The Cole Estate and the Growth of the Early Chesapeake Economy," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. XL, #2, April 1983.



<sup>18</sup>Fairfax County Will Books B-1 and C.

<sup>19</sup>Fairfax County Will Book C, page 137.

<sup>20</sup>Hawley, "The Meaning of Absence."

<sup>21</sup>Helene Von Rosenstiel and Gail Caskey Winkler, "Floor Coverings for Historic Buildings, 1750 to 1800," article in *The Colonial and Early Federal Interior* (Washington, DC: Preservation Press, 1988).

<sup>22</sup>Suzanne Lebsock, "A Share of Honor," article in *Virginia Women 1600-1945* (Richmond, Va., 1987).

<sup>23</sup>C. B. Rose, Jr., *Arlington County, Va., A History* (Arlington Historical Society, 1976).

<sup>24</sup>Dell Upton, "Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 17, #2 and 3, Summer/Autumn 1982.

Other articles on the Ball-Sellers House:

"The Ball-Sellers House in Glencarlyn," by Anne Cipriani Webb, *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 5, #3, 1975.

"The Ball-Sellers House Project," by Dean C. Allard and Ruth M. Ward, *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 7, #2, 1982.

