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EARLY ROCKVILLE TAVERNS

by Martha Sprigg Poole

Long before there was a Rockville, there were one or more taverns in the area where Rockville now stands. In 1755, General Braddock recorded that he stopped at Owens Ordinary, 16 miles from Georgetown.¹ In 1774, a group of patriots met at Charles Hungerford's Tavern (Lower District of Frederick County);² and in 1777, the first Montgomery County Court was held at the house of Leonard Davis.³

Where were these taverns? Were they the same buildings or different buildings? These questions have never been settled beyond doubt.

Before going into the matter of the location of the taverns, it will be well to fill in the background.

Until 1776, what is now Montgomery County was the Lower District of Frederick County. In it were two towns, Georgetown and Fredericktown, connected by the "Great Road". The rest of the County was frontier territory, scattered cultivated tracts hedged in by vast areas of woodland. Surely any tavern would be located on a well-traveled road.

Beginning with the Stamp Act in 1765, local groups began to form and hold meetings to express their disapproval of various Acts of the British Government. Such local groups would send delegates to Provincial meetings, and these in turn send delegates to inter-Colonial groups, such as the Stamp Act Congress and the Continental Congresses. In Maryland, the delegates from local communities organized into the Maryland Convention which, without any notable resistance, took over in 1777 as the duly constituted government of the State.⁴

On June 11, 1774, one of these local groups, the inhabitants of the Lower District of Frederick County, met at Hungerford's Tavern. Those who had been active in such groups before called the meeting, and those now ready to resist the actions of the British Government attended. Doubtless they recognized in Henry Griffith a man who had already been active in other meetings, so he was chosen moderator. The meeting adopted the following resolutions:

Resolved, unanimously, That it is the opinion of this meeting, that the town of Boston is now suffering in the common cause of America.
Resolved, unanimously, That every legal and constitutional measure ought to be used by all America, for procuring a repeal of the Act of Parliament, for blocking up the harbor of Boston.
Resolved, unanimously, That it is the opinion of this meeting that the most effectual means for the securing American freedom, will be to break off all commerce with Great Britain, and the West Indies, until the said act be repealed, and the right of taxation given up, on permanent principles.

Resolved, unanimously, That Mr. Henry Griffith, Dr. Thomas Sprigg Wootton, Nathan Magruder, Evan Thomas, Richard Brooke, Richard Thomas, Zadok Magruder, Dr. William Baker, Thomas Cramphin, Jr. and Allen Bowie, be a committee to attend the general committee at Annapolis, and of correspondence for the lower part of Frederick County and that any six of them shall have power to receive and communicate intelligence, to and from their neighboring committees.

Resolved, unanimously, that a copy of these our sentiments be immediately transmitted to Annapolis and inserted in the Maryland Gazette.

Signed per order, Archibald Orme, clk. 5

Delegates from this and similar community meetings met at Annapolis at various times as the Maryland Convention.

This Revolutionary Legislative body on Aug. 14, 1775, provided that Frederick County was to have three different places of election and three different districts. The Lower District "to be bounded with Potowmack to the mouth of Monocacy, then with Monocacy to Bennett's Creek, and with the Creek to the head waters of Patuxent." The elections for this district were to be held "at Hungerford's".⁶ On September 6, 1776, the Maryland Convention on Resolution of Dr. Thomas Sprigg Wootton, passed a Bill dividing Frederick County into three districts; the Lower District already set up, became on Oct. 1, 1776, a new County,⁷ named for General Richard Montgomery who had recently lost his life leading a Revolutionary Force in an ill-fated expedition against Canada. At this time it was directed that Court for the new County should be held at a convenient place to be chosen by the Justices. The First County Court was held May 20, 1777, at the house of Leonard Davis.⁸

As in the case of Suter's Tavern in Georgetown,⁹ the location of these three taverns which have played such an important part in Montgomery County's history has never been definitely fixed. What information have we on which to base an opinion?

Our chief undocumented source of information is a paper prepared in connection with Montgomery County's Centennial in 1876. It was written by Mr. Thomas Anderson and said:

When Montgomery County was created, Sept. 6, 1776, the town (Rockville) was a little hamlet, consisting of Charles Hungerford's tavern (kept subsequently by Leonard Davis), which is still standing, and occupied by Mrs. Susan Russell, whose grandfather, Joseph Wilson, built and owned it; the Anderson house, in which Miss Julia Anderson lives, and one or two others. The hamlet had no name until the erection of the county, when it was designated as Montgomery Court-House.

The first court was held at the house of Leonard Davis, the famous old Hungerford Tavern, on the 20th of May, 1777. . * * * The old Hungerford or Russell house is not only the oldest building in the place, but also from its associations the object of greatest interest to the antiquary. Mrs. Richard Wootton, a sister-in-law of Thomas Sprigg Wootton, who moved the erection of the county, danced in it at a ball given more than 110 years ago.¹⁰

This statement has been accepted as authentic by the many historians who have covered the subject.¹¹ It deserves serious consideration since Mr. Anderson was an able lawyer of high principles who had access to the legal documents on record in Rockville where he and his ancestors had lived for a hundred years within a stone's throw of the Russell house. A picture of the Russell house accompanies this article. Labeled "Hungerford Tavern", it had wide circulation

as a post card for many years. Many older residents of Rockville remember the Russell house well. It was formerly located on South Washington Street, where the Baptist Parsonage now stands.

In the early 1900s, the Janet Montgomery Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, accepting Mr. Anderson's identification of the Russell House as Hungerford Tavern, started a movement to have the place bought and restored. But when they searched the records for proof that Hungerford Tavern and the Russell House were the same, some came to the conclusion that they were not the same and the restoration project was dropped.

What can be learned from official documents about these taverns?

OWENS ORDINARY

A few documents have some bearing on the location of this tavern. The will of Henry Wright Crabb (1764) mentions "the 150 acres lying at the lower end of Resurvey on Valentines Garden, so as to include the house wherein Lawrence Owen formerly kept tavern". After his wife's death, this tract was to go (and did go) to Cap. William Williams.¹² Lawrence Owen owned about 400 acres, so why did he keep tavern on Crabb's Land? Lawrence's wife, Sarah, about 1772 married Joseph Wilson (of whom later). In 1762, she had purchased 48 acres of Two Brothers.¹³ Lawrence's son, Robert, inherited his father's land and acquired 100 acres of Valentines Garden. In 1780 he got a license to keep tavern.¹⁴

HUNGERFORD TAVERN

Source material relative to Hungerford Tavern is even more meager than that relating to Owens Ordinary. We know about the historic meeting held there on June 11, 1774. Twice the Maryland Convention designated Hungerfords and the "house now occupied by Charles Hungerford" as places where elections were to be held.¹⁵ A Charles Hungerford rented part of Aix-la-Chappelle near Beallsville in 1770 and 1779,¹⁶ and a Charles Hungerford purchased Resurvey on Beginning in 1787 and sold it in 1800.¹⁷ In 1777, Charles Hungerford signed as security for Leonard Davis as tavern-keeper.¹⁸ Hungerford was Justice of the Peace 1780-1781.¹⁹ All of which gives us absolutely no clue to the location of the tavern which he must have rented.

HOUSE OF LEONARD DAVIS

The first Montgomery County Court met on May 20, 1777, at the house of Leonard Davis. (Remember that in March, 1777, the Maryland Convention had designated the house of Charles Hungerford as the place for elections to be held.) Leonard Davis married Mary Wilson, daughter of Joseph.²⁰ The first official reference to him is found on a deed executed in December, 1772.²¹ In 1783 he was the owner of a tract Younger Brothers, 200 acres with a dwelling, 16 miles from Georgetown which he sold in 1785, and he also owned parts of other tracts with his father-in-law, Joseph Wilson.²²

In 1777, Leonard Davis was licensed to keep tavern with Charles Hungerford and Richard Crabb as sureties.²³ The Levy Court Records for 1777 and 1778 show various payments to Leonard Davis for food and lodging for jurors, witnesses, etc. He contracted to build the Court House and jail and the Levy Court books show payments for these items. But these projects seem not to have been successful. On May 5, 1786, Leonard Davis, Innkeeper, makes over to Joseph Wilson a long list of personal property as security for 780 pounds money and 16,000 pounds tobacco. This list included 15 slaves, farm animals and an interesting assortment of household goods in such quantities as to indicate furnishings for a

tavern.²⁴ By 1795, Leonard Davis is living in Berkley Co., Virginia (Now W. Va.), for on that date he gives to William Worthington, administrator of Davis' father-in-law, Joseph Wilson, a paper stating that he no longer is the owner of certain lots purchased in Williamsburg and turned over to Joseph Wilson.²⁵ Williamsburg, laid out about 1784, became in 1801 the town of Rockville.

On the same date as the above release, there is an agreement recorded covering Leonard Davis' connection with his father-in-law's estate. It recites that Davis is in possession of certain land of Joseph Wilson's in Virginia and of various slaves, etc. which he is supposed to have turned over to his father-in-law "for the purpose of indemnifying him for large sums of money he had paid out for Davis". A suit had been started in Berkley Co. Court, but in order to expedite the settlement of Wilson's debts, a compromise is reached by which Davis pays into Wilson's estate 1700 pounds money and gets a quit-claim on all other matters.²⁶

With all this information about Leonard Davis, we do not know where he kept the Inn which served as the first Montgomery County Court house. What do we know about his father-in-law, Joseph Wilson, said to have been the owner of the taverns operated by Hungerford and Davis?

JOSEPH WILSON and the RUSSELL HOUSE

In 1772, Joseph Wilson acquired certain property in the Rockville area from Alexander Urquhart of St. Mary's County and later added acreage to the same plots by purchase from John Lamar of Georgia and Robert Lamar of South Carolina.²⁷ These were located in Upper Newfoundland and Seneca Hundreds on the Tax List of 1783 and show buildings as follows:

- (1) Two Brothers (with part of Valentine's Garden). 272 acres; 1 old framed dwelling house; 1 new ditto 20 X 16; 2 log ditto; framed tobacco house; 3 old out houses
- (2) Conclusion; 30 acres
- (3) Joseph and James, 270 acres; 1 dwelling 16 x 20

Now if the Tax Assessment is correct - and they usually are! - and if Joseph Wilson was the owner of Hungerford's Tavern and the House of Leonard Davis, then these taverns must have been located on one of these sites. It will be remembered that Leonard Davis also had parts of Joseph and James and of Conclusion, the latter improved by a framed dwelling. None of these could have been the Russell House, which was within "Williamsburg". The first one listed could have been Owen's Ordinary site.

Joseph Wilson in 1772 was married to Sarah Owen, relict of Lawrence Owen, Innholder.²⁸ In 1778 and 1779 and 1780 he was Justice of the Peace for Montgomery County and Judge of the Orphans Court.²⁹ His will was probated Jan. 8, 1791. He left to daughter Sarah "tract where I now live, being part of Two Brothers and pt of Valentines Garden". Other bequests were made to his daughter Ann Worthington; and her husband, William Worthington, was made administrator. Various properties, including "lots which I hold at Montgomery Court House" (no mention of a house) were to be sold to pay debts, and if any thing was left it was to go to his daughter Mary Davis (wife of Leonard).³⁰ In 1794 the former Sarah Wilson (now Mrs. George Riley) and her husband sold to Heugh Riley the land on which Joseph Wilson lived being part of Two Brothers and pt. of Valentines Garden.³¹

Apparently the other property of Joseph Wilson, including his lots in Rockville remained in the hands of William Worthington. In 1842 some of the heirs

became dissatisfied, and brought suit in Montgomery County Court. As a result of this, several sales were made, through which the "Russell House" (Lot #19) became the property of Mrs. Susan Russell, a descendant of Joseph Wilson.³² In 1848, lots #18, 20 and 21, all unimproved, were sold for taxes and bought by Alexander Russell.³³ These last are the lots listed in the Equity Case cited as being the lots purchased by Joseph Wilson of William P. Williams.

It is obvious that the Russell House was very old, almost certainly built before the Revolution. The man who razed the old house said that the logs of which it was built were "chinked and dobed". The wood was hand-hewed, mortised and put together with hand-made-nails. The chimney and dormers further identify it as being pre-Revolutionary and the huge fireplace with a pothook in it and the dirt floor of the back room further testify to its great age.³⁴

From the facts as here presented it is evident that more research is needed to clear up the locations of these famous taverns. This writer has not found conclusive proof that Joseph Wilson owned the Russell House, but she has not exhausted the subject. The Russell House still could be Hungerford Tavern or the house of Leonard Davis if we could show any of the following:

- (1) That Hungerford and Davis rented from whoever was the owner of the Russell House at the time they kept taverns. Possibly historians have jumped to the conclusion that they rented from Joseph Wilson.
- (2) That Wilson and Davis bought lots from Williams before he formally laid out Williamsburg in 1784. It is unlikely that they bought them as early as 1774, which would shut out the Russell House as Hungerford Tavern, but might identify it with the Davis House in 1777.
- (3) That Williamsburg was not wholly on Exchange and New Exchange. Could Williamsburg have included other tracts, particularly part of the 150 acres of Valentines Garden which Williams got from Crabb, on which was located Owens Ordinary?

I believe that further research could clear up all these matters. Certainly the site of Hungerfords Tavern and Leonard Davis' House deserve to be marked. The Montgomery County Historical Society accepted the prevailing view and marked the Russell House with a bronze plaque on Sept. 6, 1951, as the site of these historic taverns. We commend the task of settling these locations beyond all doubt to the Commission for celebrating the coming birthday of Rockville.

References

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3. Scharf Western Maryland I, 657
4. Scharf Hist. Md. II, 111-120 and ff
5. Scharf Hist. Md. II, 151; Hist. West. Md. I, 125
6. Archives of Maryland XI, 29
7. Laws of Maryland printed by Frederick Green 1787; sessions of Aug. 31, 1776; Sept. 6, 1776; and ff
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9. See the Montgomery County Story, Vol. I, #2, Feb., 1958
10. Quoted in Scharf, Hist. West. Md. II, 739 and 740. Proceedings were published under title Centennial Celebration of the Erection of Montgomery County, Md., etc. 1876.
11. In addition to Scharf, see (1) Historic Montgomery County, Maryland by Roger B. Farquhar; (2) Western Gateway to the National Capital by Noma Thompson; (3) History of Montgomery County by Boyd; and many articles.
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21. Fred. Co. Deeds P, 70
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25. Montgo. Co. Deeds F #6, 269
26. Montgo. Co. Deeds F #6, 270
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28. Bal. of Final Distribution 6, 146 and 185
29. Archives XVI, 529; XXI, 249; XLIII, 20 and 133
30. Montgo. Co. Wills B, 433
31. Montgo. Co. Deeds E, 662
32. Montgo. Co. Equity #100, 1842; Montgo. Co. Deeds JGH #6, 70
33. Montgo. Co. Deeds STS #3, 459
34. Western Gateway to the National Capital by Noma Thompson, pg. 83