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THE STORY OF JUDGE RICHARD JOHNS BOWIE Chief Judge of Maryland, 1861-1867

by

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Bowie Family History

The Bowie family was important in the History of Maryland. It traces back in southern Maryland ancestry and land holdings to the first immigrant settler in Maryland by the name of John Bowie, who came from Scotland in 1688.

The first member of the family to attain prominence in what is now Montgomery County was Colonel Washington Bowie, born in 1776 at The Hermitage in Maryland, located in the area now known as Wheaton. Tradition has it that his father, Colonel Allan Bowie, Jr., was a friend of General George Washington and was entertaining the General at his manor estate when it came time to christen the new baby. The infant was named in honor of the General who stood as his sponsor. This child when grown married Margaret Crabb Johns. She was descended from Richard Johns who was born in Wales in 1630 and came to the Maryland Colony in the earliest days. Richard Johns' father, Sir Thomas Johns, was a member of Parliament from Wales.

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The early 1800's were good years for the Bowies. The business of Colonel Washington Bowie, with his ships bringing back valuable merchandise from many of the ports of Europe, from Hamburg and Bremen on the North Sea to Cadiz and Gibraltar on the Atlantic and the rich ports of the West Indies, was continuing to prosper the family fortunes. From the wharves of Georgetown, this prosperity and comfort was reflected in the big Bowie house on R Street on the heights of Georgetown. There were seven children in the household of Colonel Washington Bowie and his wife, Margaret Crabb Bowie. In 1813, these children ranged in age from thirteen to two years old. The oldest son, Thomas Johns, born in 1800; then Mary, born in 1802; next Margaret in 1803; then a son, Washington, named for his father; and then, in 1807, the subject of our story, Richard Johns. He was named for his mother's younger brother who was, in his later years, a resident with the family, and was buried at the family estate of which we shall hear more presently. The youngest son, Robert Gilmore, was born in 1809. The baby of the family, Sarah, was only two years old.

The life and times of this prosperous Georgetown family in the Post-Revolutionary Period have been preserved for us by the family portraits which were done as large oil paintings about the year 1813. There are three paintings in the series. One of the father, resplendent in gentlemen's frock coat and flowing cravat, one of the mother in lace cap with her two year old child tucked under her chin, and one a group of the six children arranged around a world globe. Four are standing and two are half reclining, the younger ones in the lower corner. These paintings are still preserved in a branch of the Bowie family. Color photographs of these portraits are now mounted for permanent display at the Rockville Civic Center Mansion, which was Judge Bowie's home.

Colonel Washington Bowie entered the mercantile business early in life in Georgetown with the firm of William Deakins. At about the time of his marriage in 1799 he established his business firm under the name of Bowie and Kurtz. By 1810 his success was so assured and so well known that the Annapolis Gazette was reporting him as one of the wealthiest and most public-spirited citizens of Georgetown. He was referred to as a "Merchant Prince". Then came the war of 1812 between Great Britain and the United States, often referred to in New England and elsewhere as Mr. Madison's War. The effect on over-seas trade was not felt immediately but gradually privateering began to take toll on merchant shipping. The house of Bowie lost a total of five ships to privateers and the shock to its business was fatal. It became necessary to dissolve the firm and liquidate its affairs. After settling all his debts, Colonel Washington Bowie retired to his country estate in Maryland near Olney to live as a country planter for the rest of his days. Here at Olney, an estate of 2,000 acres required extensive development and management. A stone residence was built near a spring and the necessary related buildings provided. His place was named Oatland and lay about 2 miles south of the present center of Olney on what is now Bowie Mill Road. This road passes through the estate property. Here at Oatland, Colonel Washington Bowie died in 1826 at the age of 50. He was buried in the family cemetery which he had designed on a rise of ground one-quarter mile behind his stone residence. This graveyard is completely surrounded by a five-foot stone wall which has no entrance gateway but provides a continuous barrier enclosure. In this family plot are buried the Colonel and his wife and five of his seven children, together with two other close relatives, and his oldest son's wife and two of their daughters. A sad note in relation to this graveyard of the family is that its first burial was that of the little 2 year old in the family portrait who only lived to be thirteen and was buried here two years before her father.

It is worthy of note that there are Bowie family kin by descent or marriage still in the immediate area of the original Oatland plantation.

Personal History of Judge Bowie

By the time the Bowie family moved to Oatland, young Richard Johns had the start of a good education. First, he attended schools of Georgetown, and then the relatively new Brookeville Academy. While at Brookeville he was under the guidance of a Head Master who later became head of Princeton University. After Brookeville, young Bowie went to Georgetown Law School where he completed his studies after his father's death. By 1828 we find him admitted to membership in the Montgomery County Bar. On the following year, at the mature age of 22, he was admitted to practice before the U. S. Supreme Court. He then settled down to build a practice in Montgomery County where the population was still relatively limited, approximately 15,000, and static due to the deterioration of agricultural land.

On May 25, 1833, he married Catherine L. Williams of Hagerstown, great-niece of General Otho H. Williams. About this time, too, he began assembling land on the outskirts of Rockville for establishing his future home site.

Two years later, Richard Johns Bowie was elected from Montgomery County to the Lower House of the Maryland Legislature. After two years in the Lower House, he was elected for four years to the State Senate, 1837-1841. By this time he was active in State politics in the Whig Party, which was becoming the dominant party of the Anti-Jacksonian Democrats. He attended the State convention of the Whig Party and was an elector for the National ticket of Harrison and Tyler in 1840. This party of opposition to Jackson and the Democrats, calling itself the Whig Party, was successful, broadly speaking, during the period 1834-1854. After serving for five years, 1844-1849, as State's Attorney for Montgomery County, he was then elected for two successive terms as a Whig to the U. S. Congress, beginning March 3rd, 1849.

About this time Mr. Bowie was a Director of the Farmer's Bank of Maryland with headquarters at Annapolis. (This bank had no relation to a much more recent bank of that name chartered in Montgomery County since 1900.) He also took an active interest in the direction and management of farming the 343 acres of his estate at the edge of Rockville.

Special notice should be taken of Richard Johns Bowie's support for the Episcopal Church in Rockville. This church began in 1726 as a Chapel of Ease in the backwoods, established by Rock Creek Parish down in what is now Washington, D. C. This little chapel became Christ Church, Prince George's Parish. After more than 100 years at its original location on a knoll near Rock Creek where the present Old Baltimore Road and Avery Road join, the church was relocated in downtown Rockville. The graveyard still remained at the old location. Over its long history, Christ Church has had no more loyal or able member than Richard Johns Bowie. The Parish register shows that on May 16th, 1836, he was elected as a vestryman of the Parish. From that date until his death in 1881, a period of 45 years, he was continuously either a vestryman or a warden. Incidentally, he was elected under the curious statutory process prescribed by the Maryland Vestry Act which provided for each annual Parish meeting to "vote off" one-half of the vestry before proceeding to elect the replacement of these members. This arrangement not only made possible removal of unsatis-

factory or unpopular officials but it also made possible the repeated annual honoring of particularly liked officials, such as Mr. Bowie.

An incident connected with Richard Johns Bowie's association with Christ Church occurred in 1863 while he was the Chief Judge of Maryland. This was his capture by J.E.B. Stuart's Confederate Cavalry on a Sunday in June during a raid through Rockville for supplies and horses, en route to join Lee at Gettysburg. Judge Bowie and several leading townsfolk were made prisoners and carried off in a northwesterly direction for two days by this Military Force, given no food and then released unharmed. The Judge was at the church when captured.

The Parish register shows that on July 5, 1880, the Honorable Richard J. Bowie presided at a meeting of the vestry of Prince George's Parish which by resolution authorized its Attorney to convey to the newly chartered Rockville Cemetery Association of Montgomery County, its graveyard property for the "purposes of preserving, protecting, and improving the graveyard of Christ Church" for the purpose of burial, "accommodating all Christian Denominations who are willing to bury in the same". This legal action took place only a few months before Judge Bowie's death and marks an important stage in the history of the church and in community growth.

An interesting example of the young Attorney Bowie's perspicacity for his own interest and his grounding in the history of the law, turns up in review of the deeds by which he settled title to his property for his home estate in the 1830's. One farm tract had been acquired by a Sheriff's Sale from an owner who defaulted on an array of debts. Subsequently, the delinquent owner died within a year or two. Not long thereafter, Mr. Bowie approached the widow, who by then was living in Georgetown, with a special kind of quit-claim deed. By it she surrendered on receipt of \$25.00, any remaining title she may have had in his property under right of dower. The language of this deed was archaic and lengthy and provides an insight into the medieval practice of protecting the interest of the wife and widow in her husband's property, in a much earlier time. When reviewed today, it seems as if a young lawyer's astuteness had both protected his own interest and set forth a clear case for the right of dower in general.

Upon retiring from Congress in March, 1853, Mr. Bowie was in the thick of campaigning on the Whig ticket for Governor of Maryland. It is reported that he failed election by a very narrow margin. He then proceeded to conduct his extensive law practice for several years until 1861. The new Constitution of Maryland, adopted in 1851, for the first time provided for election of State Judges. It also created four districts; the area west of the Chesapeake Bay and south of the line drawn west from Baltimore constituted the second district, including Anne Arundel and Montgomery Counties. In this district, for the first 10-year term, there had been elected William H. Tuck from Anne Arundel County, who was a Democrat. In the election of 1861, Richard Johns Bowie of Montgomery County stood as a Republican opposing Judge Tuck. Mr. Bowie won, as did also a Republican from Baltimore City, defeating the incumbent, Chief Judge LeGrande. In this changed situation of the State's Court of Appeal (the Chief Court of Maryland), the Governor, in issuing the commission to the new Judges after the election in the fall of 1861, endorsed Judge Bowie's commission to make him Chief Judge. Judge Bowie continued in this post and rank until 1867 when a new post-war Constitution changed the judiciary and their terms to provide for six judicial districts and for a 15-year term with new elections. In the ensuing election of 1867, Judge Bowie was defeated but was returned by a special election of 1871 to the Court of Appeals Bench. As an Associate Judge, the post of Chief Judge having been filled in his absence by another Judge, Judge Bowie served for his second



THE HONORABLE RICHARD JOHNS BOWIE
1807-1881

Photograph of oil painting by artist, Bernard Loiselle, done in 1971 for the Rockville Civic Center Commission from picture (c.1870) loaned by the Maryland Historical Society.

This photograph by courtesy of Carl Fenstermaker, a member of Civic Center Commission.

term on this bench from 1871 until his death in 1881. The normal age limit of 70 was waived by a special act of the Legislature which held him in such high regard, although of opposite party, that they provided for tenure for his whole term regardless of age. During Judge Bowie's term as Chief Judge, there came before the Court of Appeals the validity of the Constitution of 1864, which was adopted by a very narrow State-wide vote with the help of soldier ballots. It had the intended actual effect of disfranchising the large block of southern sympathizers. The court ruled, 4 to 1, that the vote was valid and therefore the measure was legal. This created such an uproar that the Legislature, the following year, adopted another Constitution revoking the one of 1864. This then was confirmed by popular vote, in 1867, and with many amendments, became the basic document under which the State of Maryland is still governed.

Judge Bowie died on March 12, 1881, age 73 years, 9 months. His funeral was conducted by the Rector of Christ Church, the Reverend R. T. Brown, assisted by four other clergymen and Bishop Pinkney of the Baltimore Diocese. He was buried in the old church cemetery, just recently transferred to the care of the Rockville Cemetery Association, and located only a few hundred yards from his long-time residence. The Judge's simple will left all of his property to his wife, Catherine Williams Bowie. She continued to live on the estate, long known as Glenview, and died there in 1891, ten years after his death. Her will leaves the bulk of her property among several nieces. A large stained glass window was given in 1892 to Christ Church (probably by the heirs) and placed above the altar. The inscription reads, "In memory of Richard Johns Bowie and Catherine Williams Bowie." One family bequest is of special interest, namely "the silver that came from Oatland." This is distributed under the terms of her will among six grandsons of Colonel Washington Bowie (Judge Bowie's father). They are all named and the actual distribution is to be done by the oldest, who is the son of Mary Bowie Chichester. The distribution by him is to be "share and share alike." This is a vivid reminder of the strong family ties among the Bowies. There is no record of the amount of the silver. However, the inventory of Judge Bowie's estate ten years earlier shows an item of 144 ounces of silver. This may have been tableware, hollowware and plate but the quantity itself, amounting to nine pounds, showed an unusual extent of such articles of gracious living.

Richard Johns Bowie was no show-off. His career was solid and substantial. In many ways, he was one of the most important men contributed to the State and to the country by Montgomery County, yet he lacked the brilliance to make a lasting prominent reputation. He was sound in the law in which he came to the top; he was a farmer who practiced improved agriculture, a banker, a stalwart churchman, and a legislator both in State and National affairs. He presided over the State's highest court during the troublesome days of the Civil War and its aftermath.

Judge Bowie's Home

The story of Judge Bowie's home begins 250 years ago in the land record of the earliest settlement in middle Montgomery County in what was then a great wilderness along Rock Creek. Land was acquired by grants from the Lord Proprietor of the Colony, Lord Baltimore, through land patents. These often received fanciful names and had vague boundaries. The property which Judge Bowie assembled for his farm estate in the vicinity of Rock Creek, east of Rockville, was based on four early land

patents under the names of Easy-Come By, 1722; Mill Land, 1724; Martha's Delight, 1726; and Rock Spring, 1769. The history of these Land Titles, until their acquisition by Judge Bowie, has been carefully traced by Miss Martha Poole, former Historian of the Montgomery County Historical Society. In a series of unpublished papers, the documents provide a running commentary on the agriculture and economy of the countryside, during the period from the beginning of tobacco farming to the exhaustion of the land by over-cropping through the post-revolutionary period.

The young Mr. Bowie built his residence of stone on elevated ground a thousand feet north of the highway from Rockville toward Baltimore. In later years it became known as the Old Baltimore Road. The first striking feature of the Judge Bowie house is its setting in open park-like grounds facing a 600 ft. mall which is flanked by many great trees and shut off at the end by a grove of oaks. Today the wide flagstone portico facing the mall has four columns with plain capitals and a pediment, in the style of the early period of Greek revival. This style was that of the original house as shown by a photograph in The Baltimore Sun of Oct. 16, 1904. The two main doorways at the north and south sides of the central structure pass through two-foot walls. These unusual massive walls result from later encasing of the original masonry with new stone work. The house includes a good-sized third story in the central portion which has a large western window, of the type involving an arched central window with smaller side windows known as Palladian Motif. A considerable knowledge of its early layout can be gathered from descriptions of furnishings found in the will of Mrs. Bowie probated in 1891. It identifies in distributing various household effects to her nieces the following rooms within the house: On the first floor, front and back parlors, library, and dining room. On the second floor, three bedrooms, and bedroom space in the attic. The dining room must have been extensive because she bequeathed three large dining room tables. Although Judge Bowie and his wife had no children, there were two nieces who lived with them for many years. It is apparent that considerable social activity went on at the establishment which was known from the early days as Judge Bowie's house at Glenview. The issue of The Baltimore Sun, above cited, carries a nostalgic article about such affairs by a self-styled orator. The style of the later addition in 1926, by Architect Erwin S. Porter of Washington, D.C., is severely plain. The two-story, one-room extension of the house, to the west, has the feeling on the north wall of much earlier work. The new rear wing with its dormers and end chimneys crams much staff housing and workroom into early Maryland architectural lines. The cellar entrance archway in this wing is an example of very good masonry, both in design and in workmanship.

That portion of the Judge Bowie estate which contains his residence did not pass from the hands of the Bowie heirs until 1905, 14 years after the widow's death. After several other transfers, it came in 1918 to the ownership of Mrs. Irene M. Smith, later Mrs. Charles Alexander Lyon. She, and Dr. Lyon after her death, held the property for 35 years until 1953. During this time they made many improvements to the grounds and mansion house (as previously described in the architectural discussion) and in the elaborate sunken gardens and massive screen windbreak to the west of the property. The cottage with two stories and basement which was added at the left of the front portico was a playhouse for the Lyons' daughter and was often referred to as the doll's house. After being on the market for sometime in the early 1950's, the mansion house with 28 acres was sold in 1953 to the Montgomery County Historical Society for its headquarters. The Society financed its carrying costs for several years by leasing the building to the Montgomery County Board of Education for classroom purposes. It was then acquired in 1956 by the city of Rockville as a Community Center at a cost of \$125,000.00. This purchase, though criticized at the time, has proved to be a notable investment in public service for community affairs and

cultural development. The title deed for the building and the 28 acres and its improvements is dated Aug. 28, 1957, and is recorded in Liber 2377, Folio 577. Additional land purchases adjoining the original tract through 1963 brought the total Civic Center holding to 64 acres. In 1961 an entirely new structure was added near the front of the property at the edge of the mall. This provided an auditorium with theater capacity of 500 seats and a social hall with capacity of about 300 at a lower level beneath the stage, together with related parking. The Rockville City Council has established by ordinance the Rockville Civic Center Commission. This body manages the former Bowie Mansion and grounds for public purposes on behalf of the city and administers its day-to-day operations in cooperation with uses by the City's Department of Recreation. The mansion houses the monthly art shows of the Rockville Art League and various special seasonal shows by it and other bodies. The grounds provide the setting for 2 major annual events, one in the spring, sponsored by the Rockville Arts Council, and one in the fall, the antique automobile show. This is participated in by car owners from the entire region.

Thus it seems clear that Judge Bowie's house, as it moves into the midst of the second century of its existence, becomes not a dead relic of the past but a living symbol of a community which grows, while treasuring its past, towards new ways of broadening its outlook and enjoying its new life and time.

Down Wind and Up

Echoes of 300 years "bygone" carry faintly from the earliest Maryland Colony where Scottish and Welsh forebears of Judge Bowie began life in the new world. Midway down that time span, the echoes become sharp and brisk from the men and women who shaped the life and times of the lad who was to become a Judge. Give and take of politics and banking, the quieter needs of farm and church were all part of the molding of a man. From the cross-currents of the time came the judicial temperament and mind which flowered into a Chief Judge and later a long-time Judge for whom, in the minds of even his opponents, the calendar was no bar. Here was steady growth. But down the winds of the past and beating up into the future is the spirit of family loyalty and solidarity. The silver that came from Oatland goes back to six grandsons, "Share and Share Alike", by his wise hand, 10 years after the Judge's demise. This was no accident, it was obviously planned, but his spirit of steady good-will for the public interest is still with us long after his departure. His home is a blessing to an entire community and city which is now twice the size of the entire County he represented long ago. The enlargement of his heritage, which comes to us through other hands, is still our task.

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