

The Montgomery County Story

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The Peter Family of Montgomery County

by Jane C. Sween

The story of the Peter family begins in Georgetown, the new settlement on the Potomac River, when that area was still a part of Frederick County. In 1791, Georgetown became a part of the District of Columbia, but by then the family had become owners of large tracts of land in Montgomery County where some became political leaders. Several of their homes are still extant: *Tudor Place* in Georgetown is open to the public; *Hayes Manor*, *Montevideo* and *Montanverde* are in private ownership. As a prominent family the Peters have taken their place in history and engendered many stories which are sidelights to their era. Some of these incidents, unprovable, are recounted here as "tradition says... ."

ROBERT PETER

(1726-1806)

ROBERT PETER was one of Georgetown's pioneer businessmen. He had been born at Crossbasket near Glasgow, Scotland to Thomas and Jane (Dunlop) Peter who were well connected to families of landed estates and import/export firms. In 1746, at the age of 20, he came to Bladensburg in Prince George's County as an employee of John Glassford & Co., a Glasgow factor.

Soon after George Gordon built a warehouse at the confluence of Rock Creek and the Potomac River and became a tobacco inspector, Peter came to Georgetown as the agent for his firm. The riverfront became a busy port, and his company had a monopoly on a large part of the Potomac River trade. In 1751 the first 80 lots were laid out for a town on parts of the tracts "Knave's Dispute" owned by George Gordon and "Rock of Dumbarton" inherited by George Beall from his father Ninian Beall. Robert Peter bought a lot on the north side of The Keys (now Water Street) on the riverfront, and here he built a warehouse. Later he acquired other lots in the growing town as well as land in Montgomery County – thousands of acres by the time of his death.

Robert and Elizabeth (Scott) Peter moved into a house on High Street (now Wisconsin Avenue). He owned the whole block between 31st and Bridge (now M) Streets which was known as Peter's Square.⁵ Here they raised their family – eight surviving children from eleven.

When Robert Peter made his will on May 20, 1802, it was understandably lengthy. There were three codicils written, and then, just a few days before his death there was a non-cupitave (oral) addition. His daughter Elizabeth, who doubted the soundness of his mind at the time, later contested this, but a jury upheld it.⁶ Elaborate directions were given for the distribution of his sizable estate. He owned thousands of acres in Montgomery County which were divided into six parts, and lots were drawn for each heir's portion.⁷ Special provisions were made for his son Alexander whose moral habits gave his father no end of worry.

Robert Peter died on November 15, 1806. In 1809, Mrs. Peter purchased a house at 3033 N Street from the Beall sisters, Elizabeth and Ann. Her widowed daughter Margaret (Peter) Dick and son Robert came to live with her until her death on November 2, 1821 at the age of 78.

2ND GENERATION

THOMAS PETER (1769-1834) Thomas Peter was the eldest child of Robert and Elizabeth (Scott) Peter. Born on January 4, 1769, he was 26 years old when he was married on January 6, 1795 to Martha Parke Custis, the 18 year old granddaughter of Martha Washington and daughter of Martha's deceased son "Jackie" Custis. Mrs. Washington expressed her pleasure at the marriage in a letter to Sarah Fairfax dated May 17, 1798, telling of her two granddaughters:

*"the eldest of the two, Elizabeth, married Mr. Law, a man of fortune from the East Indies... The other, Martha, married Mr. Thomas Peter, son of Robert Peter of Georgetown, who is also very wealthy. Both live in the Federal City."*⁸

History shows that Martha Peter's was the best union.

Robert Peter gave his son Thomas a house, one of six he built east of Rock Creek on K Street. Then, about 1804, the Thomas Peters moved into a home which tradition says was built with money Mrs. Peter received from the estate of George Washington. With the help of Dr. William Thornton, the architect of the Capitol and a personal friend, they completed and added to a house begun by Thomas Lowndes. Known as *Tudor Place* it remains a showplace among Georgetown homes.

Mr. Peter, a staunch Federalist in politics, followed his father as a public figure. In 1808 he was made director of the Bank of Columbia. He was also a member of the Jockey Club where he served as a steward of the races held at the Meridian Hill track.

In addition to *Tudor Place* on the heights of Georgetown, the Peters had a summer home, *Oakland* near Seneca in Montgomery County. This house is no longer in existence. When Thomas Peter died on April 16, 1834, his wife continued to live at *Tudor Place* and summered at *Montevideo*, the home of her eldest son, John Parke Custis Peter, in the neighborhood of

Oakland. For the last six years of her life, her daughter Britannia (Peter) Kennon lived with her at *Tudor Place* and Britannia's daughter Margaret eventually inherited this family home. When Mrs. Martha (Custis) Peter died on July 13, 1854, her casket was carried up River Road and buried beside her husband in the family cemetery. This is in a field between *Oakland* and *Montevideo* with markers extant surrounded by a fence.

ALEXANDER SCOTT PETER (1770-1807) Alexander was the second son, one of three unmarried sons of Robert and Elizabeth (Scott) Peter. He was born on July 22, 1770, while the family was still living on K Street. This son was, to say the least, a non-conformist in a family of able men, and caused his father much worry. Little is known of him except from his father's will. Several codicils reflect concern for his son and his "unfortunate habits".⁹ At various times the father raised or lowered his inheritance reflecting his son's good behavior and subsequent slips from grace. Finally:

*"being perfectly of the opinion that no good or virtuous woman would ever connect herself in marriage to a man so abandoned to drunkenness as very unfortunately my son...has been for many years and still continues to be..."*¹⁰

He reduced his son's inheritance to about 20 pounds and recommended him to the care of family and friends so that he would never suffer from lack of clothing, food or lodging. His father's opinion proved correct; he never married and died October 24, 1807, not quite a year after his father.

ELIZABETH PETER (1771-1837) Elizabeth was born on July 12, 1771, the first daughter in the family. She was also the first to wed when she married her cousin James Dunlop in the fall of 1787 at the age of 16. An insight to her father's interest in the wedding is given in a letter to a fellow merchant, John Davidson of Annapolis, asking for Mrs. Davidson's help to select some samples of silk suitable for a wedding dress with the price of each:

*"I want everything good and fashionable, but as you know we old Fellows like everything as cheap as can be got to have them good."*¹¹

Spoken as a true Scotsman! Georgetown was still a small town; Annapolis was a city of sophistication in comparison.

Robert Peter gave the couple a house in Georgetown on Wisconsin Avenue as he did for her brothers. Then, five years after they were married, James Dunlop purchased 700 acres in Montgomery County from the heirs of Reverend Alexander Williamson.¹² On this property was a house built in 1762 called *Hayes Manor*, which is still standing today near the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Jones Bridge Road.



"Hayes Manor", home of James and Elizabeth (Peter) Dunlop

Rev. Alexander Williamson, an Englishman, was rector of Prince George's Parish. He had built this fine Georgian style home and moved into it with his young bride, Elizabeth Lyons of Baltimore. At the outbreak of the Revolution Rev. Williamson, an ardent Tory, refused to sign the Oath of Fidelity and was removed from his clerical duties.

The Dunlops purchased *Hayes Manor* as a summer home but it soon became a year-round residence. Here the Dunlops raised their eleven children, and it stayed in the family through Dunlop and Laird ownership until 1965. The east wing was added in 1899; the west wing was built in 1908.¹³

James Dunlop, born in Scotland in 1755, was a prosperous merchant and a director of the Bank of Columbia. When he died on March 3, 1823, his wife inherited the home. She died on March 6, 1837.

WALTER PETER (1772-1772)

ROBERT PETER (1774-1808)

JEAN PETER (1775-1775)

MARGARET PETER (1776-1859) Margaret, the second living daughter, was born April 12, 1776. When she was 22 years old she married Thomas Dick, son of Robert Dick of Bladensburg. A son Robert was born in 1800. Soon thereafter Thomas Dick died on a trip to the West Indies and was buried at sea. His will, probated in 1803, stated that he lived in Bladensburg. Margaret and her small son moved back to Georgetown to live with her mother at 3033 N Street and continued to live there after her mother's death in 1821. Robert Dick never married and continued to live in this same house until his death in 1870. He inherited his mother's property in Montgomery County which was her share of her father's estate.¹⁴

UNNAMED CHILD (1777-1777)

DAVID PETER (1778-1812) David Peter was born on July 17, 1778 and was married to Sarah Johns on September 7, 1799 at the age of 21. In 1808 he built a house in Georgetown a block from his brother's *Tudor Place* known as *Peter's Grove*. It is no longer standing.

Little is known of his brief public life. The *National Intelligencer* newspaper of March 10, 1806, shows him as a director of the Office of Discount and Deposit for the District of Columbia.

He also owned acreage in Montgomery County. He had inherited 357 ½ acres of "Easy Purchase" and 112 ½ acres of "Beall's Industry" as his sixth share of Robert Peter's estate. David Peter was only 34 years old when he died on December 1, 1812, leaving three surviving children, Jane, Elizabeth and Hamilton. At his death, his executors sold his property in the county at a public sale at Union Tavern on June 7, 1813. This included the tracts "Carderock", "Dowl's Discovery" (sic), "James' Park", "The Ferry Landing" and "Resurvey on Honesty" which were adjacent to each other.¹⁵

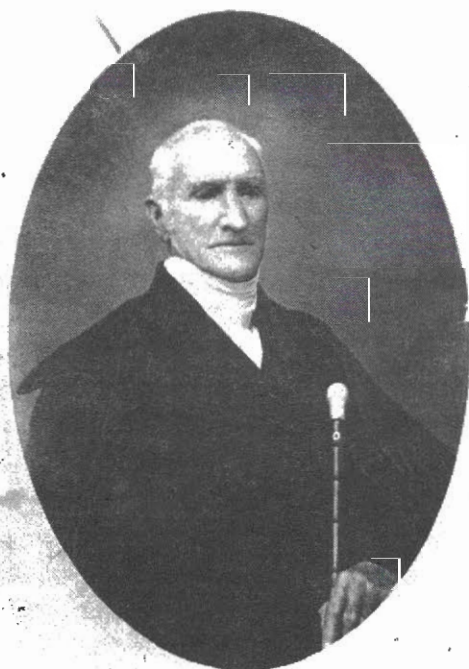
Mrs. Sarah (Johns) Peter died October 7, 1823 and *Peter's Grove* was sold.

GEORGE PETER (1779-1861) George Peter, certainly the best known family member in public life, was born on September 28, 1779. He attended Georgetown College, now Georgetown University, as a young man.

Tradition says that at age 15 he joined the Maryland troops raised during the Whiskey Rebellion. This came to the attention of his parents and then to George Washington, a family friend, and he was ordered home because of his youth. His military ardor was not diminished, and five years later he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the 9th Infantry by George Washington himself at Mt. Vernon.

Lieutenant Peter then went west on the staff of Gen. James Wilkinson to the General's various postings, which included the first governorship of the Louisiana Territory.¹⁶ While there Wilkinson became involved in the schemes of Aaron Burr and, in 1807, Peter was a witness at Burr's trial.¹⁷ In 1808 he became a major in the light artillery, but in 1809 Major Peter resigned his commission.¹⁸

In November 1809, he married Ann Plater, daughter of Thomas Plater and his wife Martha (Lingan) Plater. Although Peter had a home at 3017 N Street in Georgetown, he built a summer residence in Montgomery County in 1812 which he called *Montanverde*. Located on Berryville Road between Darnestown and Seneca, it was first constructed of brick and is now covered with wood siding.¹⁹



Major George Peter

During the War of 1812, he returned to active duty as a major in command of a battalion of artillery. His troops played an important part in the Battle of Bladensburg where they covered the retreat of the American forces, which led to the British occupation of Washington.

Returning to civilian life, then styled "Major Peter", he was the first Democrat elected to the U.S. Congress from the Sixth Congressional District which included Montgomery County. However his victory was challenged because his principal residence was claimed to be in Georgetown, not within the county or election district. Congress did vote to seat him, and he served there in 1815-1816 and was reelected in 1817 and 1828. He also served in the Maryland House of Delegates from 1819 to 1827. In 1855 he became Commissioner of Public Works for Maryland.²⁰

About 1837, he sold his house in Georgetown and moved permanently to *Montanverde*.²¹ Here he frequently entertained political gatherings. Tradition says that on at least one occasion Abraham Lincoln, then a Congressman, was present at a rally there and spent the night, hence one of the first floor bedrooms was called the Lincoln Room. Another tradition claims that Major Peter enjoyed an evening toddy, and that one may hear at times the sound of the empty glass shattering on the hearth.



"Montanverde"
Home of Major George Peter

George Peter's first wife, Ann, died on February 8, 1814, not yet 23 years of age, and both of their children died that same year. In July 1815, he married Agnes B. Freeland, and this couple had five children although only two, Robert and James Freeland, reached adulthood. When Agnes (Freeland) Peter died George Peter married Sarah Norfleet Freeland as his third wife in 1825. This couple had nine children.

Tradition says that Major Peter was a man of splendid physique and

was six feet in height, which was exceptionally tall at the time. He died on June 22, 1861 and is buried in Oak Hill Cemetery in Georgetown.

JAMES PETER (1785-1810) James Peter, the youngest son of Robert Peter, was born on July 11, 1785, and was not of age when his father wrote his will. Guardians were appointed to oversee his inheritance. They were to make sure that he received the rents and profits of the land his father left him. The money was to be used to complete his education. However, James Peter died in 1810, just four years after his father.

SOME SELECTED PETERS OF THE 3RD GENERATION

JOHN PARKE CUSTIS PETER (1799-1848) John Parker Custis Peter, the eldest child of Thomas and Martha Parke (Custis) Peter, was born on November 14, 1799. As a young man he must have spent enough time in Montgomery County to be elected as a representative to the Maryland House of Delegates and served in 1826, 1827 and 1828.²²

On February 2, 1830, he married Elizabeth Jane Henderson, the daughter of James Henderson, a professor at William and Mary College. They were married at *Montanverde*, the home of his uncle Major George Peter.²³

For a while the newlyweds lived with his parents but soon began construction of a home near *Oakland*. The house was built of native red sandstone covered with stucco. They named it *Montevideo*.²⁴ Although perhaps built as a summer home, John P.C. Peter and his wife soon

lived in the house year-round. His interest in farming led to his election as the first president of the Montgomery County Agricultural Society in 1844 and he continued in this position until his death.²⁵

Between 1831 and 1844, the Peters had eight children. Then, suddenly, on January 19, 1848, at the age of 49, John P.C. Peter died of lockjaw as the result of a rusty nail in his finger. He was buried in the family cemetery between *Montevideo* and *Oakland*.

The Peter household included a tutor for the children, the Reverend Charles Howard Nourse. He had previously founded an academy for boys in Washington and had been a teacher at the Rockville Academy. Also an ordained minister, he was the founder of the Poolesville Presbyterian Church while in the employ of the Peters. He was a widower with one small son. When the recently widowed Mrs. Peter and the Reverend Nourse were married on March 5, 1849, there was much talk of propriety. Tradition says that although Mrs. Thomas Peter had previously spent much time at her son's *Montevideo* after the death of her husband, when her daughter-in-law was remarried so quickly she vowed never to enter the house again. It was for this reason that at her death the coffin was carried up River Road from Georgetown and buried by torchlight so that her body would not rest in that house overnight.

Two girls were born to the Nourses at *Montevideo* and the couple was given guardianship of the Peter children by the Montgomery County Court. About 1854, the couple and some of the children moved to Leesburg, Virginia where Rev. Nourse established a boarding school. During the Civil War he was arrested by a party of New York Cavalry on charges of giving information to the Confederates. He was placed in the Old Capitol Prison but was later released.



"Montevideo",
home of John Parke Custis Peter

Montevideo was held in trust for the Peter children and was sold in 1876. The house on River Road near Seneca is now owned by Mr. Austin Kiplinger.

COLUMBIA WASHINGTON, AMERICA PINKNEY AND BRITANNIA WELLINGTON PETER

Thomas and Martha Parke (Custis) Peter gave their three daughters unique names:

COLUMBIA WASHINGTON PETER was born December 2, 1798, and died, unmarried, on December 3, 1831 at age 23. She is buried in the family cemetery at *Montevideo*.

AMERICA PINKNEY PETER, born October 12, 1803, was married to William G. Williams, a graduate of West Point, on June 22, 1826. They met when he was an aide to Lafayette during the

Marquis' visit to *Tudor Place* on his tour of America in 1824. Capt. Williams was Chief of Engineers on General Zachary Taylor's staff and was killed at the Battle of Monterey.²⁶

BRITANNIA WELLINGTON PETER, the youngest child, was born January 7, 1815. As a young girl she was a bridesmaid for her cousin Mary Custis at her marriage to Robert E. Lee. Britannia was married on December 6, 1842, to Commander Beverly Kennon, USN as his second wife and they lived at the Washington Navy Yard. On February 22, 1844, President John Tyler, his cabinet, their families and other prominent people – about 400 in all – were invited to spend the day aboard the USS Princeton. Comm. Kennon was among those present. Anchored about seven miles below Washington on the Potomac, they fired a cannon which exploded. The Secretaries of State and Navy and Comm. Kennon were among those killed.

Britannia (Peter) Kennon and her daughter returned to *Tudor Place* to live with her mother. When her mother died Britannia inherited the family home and lived there as a widow for 66 years. The daughter, Martha Custis Kennon married her cousin Dr. Armistead Peter, son of Maj. George Peter, so that *Tudor Place* stayed in the family for several more generations.²⁷

GEORGE PETER, JR. (1829-1893) George Peter, the eldest son of Major George Peter by his third wife, was born at *Montanverde* on November 28, 1829. As a young man he studied law in Rockville with John Brewer with whom he later formed a partnership. After the death of Mr. Brewer he entered into a law practice with James B. Henderson who later became a judge of the Montgomery County Circuit Court. George Peter was a trial lawyer held in great regard by the legal circles of the county. In addition, he was a trustee of the Rockville Academy.

In politics he was a Democrat and a leader in that party as his father had been. He was a member of the Maryland Constitutional Convention of 1864. In 1868, he was elected State's Attorney for Montgomery County and was re-elected in 1872. Twice he was elected to the Maryland State Senate. In his last term there he was president of that body. He was nominated by his party for the U.S. Senate but was defeated by the Republican candidate, Milton G. Uner.²⁸

In 1852, he married Eliza Lavinia Gassaway, daughter of John Gassaway. Seven of their children reached maturity. The Peters lived in a home at the end of North Adams Street in Rockville. George Peter, Jr. died August 6, 1893 and Mrs. Peter died May 11, 1909.

WALTER GIBSON PETER (1842-1863) Walter Gibson Peter, son of Major George Peter and his third wife, was born at *Montanverde* on October 18, 1842. Because his mother died when he was four years old, he was raised by his sister Sarah Agnes hearing stories of his father's military exploits.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Walter expressed his sympathy for the Southern cause as did many young men of that part of the county. He helped to organize a cavalry unit, and was elected lieutenant, but the group was short-lived and saw no action. When it was disbanded he went to Leesburg to live with Rev. and Mrs. Nourse, she the widow of his cousin John P.C. Peter, at their

school. But soon he became a civilian aide to Col. Walter Hanson Jenifer and was present at the Battle of Ball's Bluff.

By late December 1861, "Gip", as he was called by his friends, became a Lieutenant in the company of Elijah Veirs White, also a Montgomery County native. However by February 1, 1862, he had left for Tennessee to join his cousin William Orton Williams.²⁹

William Orton Williams, who went by the name of Orton, was the son of America Pinkney (Peter) Williams. He had already been unsuccessful in both receiving an appointment to West Point and as a suitor for his second cousin Agnes Lee, daughter of Robert E. Lee. He joined the army on the staff of General Leonidas Polk, Army of the Tennessee. Williams had a reputation for erratic behavior and had a checkered military career. For some unknown reason he had changed his name to Lawrence William Orton in 1862.

On June 8, 1863, the cousins rode out of the Confederate camp and crossed the Union lines near Franklin, Tennessee. They were not in uniform and, when challenged, claimed to be Federal inspectors from Washington, D.C. They used the aliases Major George Dunlop and Colonel Lawrence W. Auton. The two men said that their papers and personal possessions had been confiscated by Rebel pickets. "Major Dunlop's" sword showed the name W.G. Peter, and their real names and ranks were in their hats.³⁰

A court-martial was convened on June 9th. They were found guilty of spying and were condemned to be hanged immediately.³¹ Walter Gibson Peter was only 22 and Orton Williams was 25. Were they really spying or were they on one of William's escapades? Both were buried in the same grave. Later the family claimed the bodies and reinterred them in the family plot in Oak Hill Cemetery, Georgetown.

These biographies were chosen from the many people in the Peter line for their connection to events in both the history of the United States and Montgomery County. The dates of births, marriages and deaths are taken from the files of the Montgomery County Historical Society Library as well as sources cited below.

About the author: Jane Sween, a Montgomery County native, served as librarian of the Montgomery County Historical Society for 30 years.

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- ⁷ Will, op. cit.
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Maureen Altobello, Editor*

PETER

ROBERT PETER m. ELIZABETH SCOTT

THOMAS	ALEXANDER SCOTT	ELIZABETH	WALTER	ROBERT	JEAN	MARGARET	child	DAVID	GEORGE	JAMES
m Martha Parke Custis		m James Dunlop				m Thomas Dick		m Sarah Johns	m - Ann Plater - Agnes Freeland - Sarah Freeland	
MARTHA ELIZA	COLUMBIA WASHINGTON	JOHN PARKE CUSTIS	GEORGE WASHINGTON	AMERICA PINKNEY	ROBERT THOMAS	MARTHA CUSTIS	BRITTANIA WELLINGTON			
		m Elizabeth Jane Henderson	m Jane Boyce	m William G. Williams			m Beverly Kennon			
GEORGE	THOMAS PLATER	ROBERT	ANN	JAMES FREELAND	AGNES	DAVID	SARAH AGNES	GEORGE	ALEXANDER SCOTT	MARGARET DICK
		m Roberta Johnson		m - Catherine Baldwin - Mary Lanterman				m Eliza Lavinia Gassaway	m Jane Alice Gassaway	m John Wilkins Mosley
					ELIZABETH	ARMISTEAD (Dr.)	WALTER GIBSON	WILLIAM	KATHERINE	
					m Thomas Peter s/o John P.C. Peter	m Martha Custis Kennon d/o Beverly & Brittania W. (Peter) Kennon				

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