

WRIGHT-FUL RECOGNITION

by Margaret A. Rusciollelli

The site of Leesylvania State Park includes 508 acres, a fraction of the original land grant. The peninsula, surrounded by Powell's and Neabsco Creeks and the Potomac River, was approximately 2,000 acres when granted to Gervais Dodson in 1658. Surveyors, remaining in their shallops, parcelled out the properties as they plied north along the Potomac River.

Dodson transferred the land to Henry Corbin of Westmoreland County. Corbin was one of the English gentry who came to Virginia during the Cavalier emigration. These Northern Neck settlers were a close little group. Therefore, it is not surprising that Laetitia Corbin, Henry's daughter, married Richard Lee. Richard was the second of eight children. His father was Richard Lee, an emigrant of Cobbs Hall, Northumberland County. Laetitia inherited the estate fifty miles north of her home and in turn relinquished the site to her oldest son, Richard Lee. The property was again transferred to Henry Lee, Richard's youngest brother.

Henry Lee dealt in real estate and traded 1,000 acres on Powell's Creek to John Wright, a Northern Neck neighbor. In exchange for the property John turned over 800 acres of Cabin Point, Westmoreland County, 200 pounds sterling, 10,000 lbs. tobacco, and five mulatto slaves. (Westmoreland Co. Deed & Wills #7 pg. 292).

John Wright arrived on his new plantation with very proper credentials. His mother was Anne Washington, great aunt to George. Major Francis Wright, his father, was born at Coan, Northumberland County in 1660. Francis was educated in England under the guardianship of his uncle, Col. Nicholas Spencer. Francis received, among his numerous accolades, the title of "First Citizen of Westmoreland County." This royal commission was bestowed on Francis by Queen Anne upon her accession to the throne. Richard Wright, the emigrant, was John's grandfather who was married to Anne Mottrom. She was the daughter of Col. John Mottrom, first settler on the Northern Neck. Records in England can trace the Wrights to approximately the early sixteenth century.

The Wright family moved to their new estate adjacent to the Lees in 1723. John, a justice in Westmoreland County, was appointed to that position in his new county of Stafford. In 1731, when Prince William County was formed, Justice Wright and fourteen of his associates continued to act as judges and county commissioners.

Details of the court proceedings from the formation of the county are missing. The earliest record book was among the documents taken or destroyed by Union soldiers when they ransacked the Brentsville Courthouse. It is known that Justice Wright and his wife Dorothy had two sons, Francis and John. Exact dates of John

and Dorothy's deaths can only be surmised. Lost records are to blame. Burial records of Hamilton Parish in that time period are unavailable. The date of death suggested for husband and wife was prior to May 1739. This date is obtained by a deed record in Prince William County Deed Book E pg. 339. This deed carries one directly back to the Leesylvania property. It also gives a clue to the family differences that surfaced in the aftermath of John's death.

Perhaps John Sr. did not expect difficulties to develop between his sons. He had been responsible for the settlement of his father's estate when Major Francis died intestate. Court records bear evidence that his sister, stepmother, and half-brother were adequately provided for. This, however, was not going to be the case with Francis, who inherited the 1,000 acres along Powell's Creek. John Sr. died intestate and the law of primogeniture was enforced which entitles the oldest son to inherit all of the property. Why there was no will can only be speculation but it was unfortunate for the younger son.

Francis was not about to act in the same benevolent manner his father had as heir. John Jr. and he apparently were at odds although the grudges, whatever they may have been, are lost in time. A factual account comes from the Prince William County Deed Book D pgs. 127-131. It tells of a land transaction by Francis Wright on May 28, 1739. Benjamin Grayson purchased 333 acres, a third of the

Wright estate, for about \$2,000 in present day currency. That very day Francis bought from the same Benjamin Grayson 711 acres of land about 25 miles northwest of his late father's estate. This new land was on Bull Run. Twenty-one months later the remaining two-thirds of the Wright estate was sold back to Henry Lee for approximately \$5,000. (Prince William County Deed Book E p. 339) In less than two years Francis Wright dissolved the family home and property.

An abundance of documents, well over 50, left by Francis and John exist in the county records. They reveal the rift in the brothers' families. John had been forced by Francis to leave the homestead and was powerless in the face of the law of primogeniture to prevent the sale of the estate. Subsequent records indicate John's attitude, the most telling entry one noted after Francis' death in 1742 at age 33. A guardian, Thomas Stribling, was appointed to oversee the three daughters left fatherless. John showed no tender mercies toward the family such as offering to take the girls in.

In 1742 Fairfax County was formed and young John Wright was among the five justices who retained residence in Prince William County. New appointments followed as the courthouse was relocated from the original site on the south side of Occoquan Creek to an area near present day Rt. 646 on the Quantico Marine Base. From this new seat of government, on March 25, 1754, the presiding justice,

John Wright, administered to young Henry Lee the oath which allowed him to become a practicing attorney. Henry Lee was the father of Light Horse Harry Lee and the grandfather of Robert E. Lee.

The following year, on August 25, 1755, Lord Thomas Fairfax accepted Justice John Wright's invitation to preside over the daily session. It is noted that after a party held the same evening at the home of one of the justices, both Lord Fairfax and Justice Wright appeared in court the next morning in good condition!

During the period of time in which the Wright property near Leesylvania was being disposed of, John moved to an area over 20 miles west of Dumfries in Germantown along Licking Run. He married Elizabeth Darnall. Among their new neighbors was the Thomas Marshall family.

In 1759 Fauquier County was formed from Prince William and John Wright was appointed a justice of the new county. The roster of those who shared this position with him includes the names of many who had dispensed justice in Prince William County. The legal ability of John Wright and the high regard in which he was held is evident by the continuation of commissions. He carried out civic and vestryman responsibilities until his death in 1792.

The stories of many families make up the early history of Prince William County. The

legacy of the Wrights has been obscured and overshadowed by the Lees. Recognition is due and appropriate for this family, whose members contributed to the establishment of three counties.

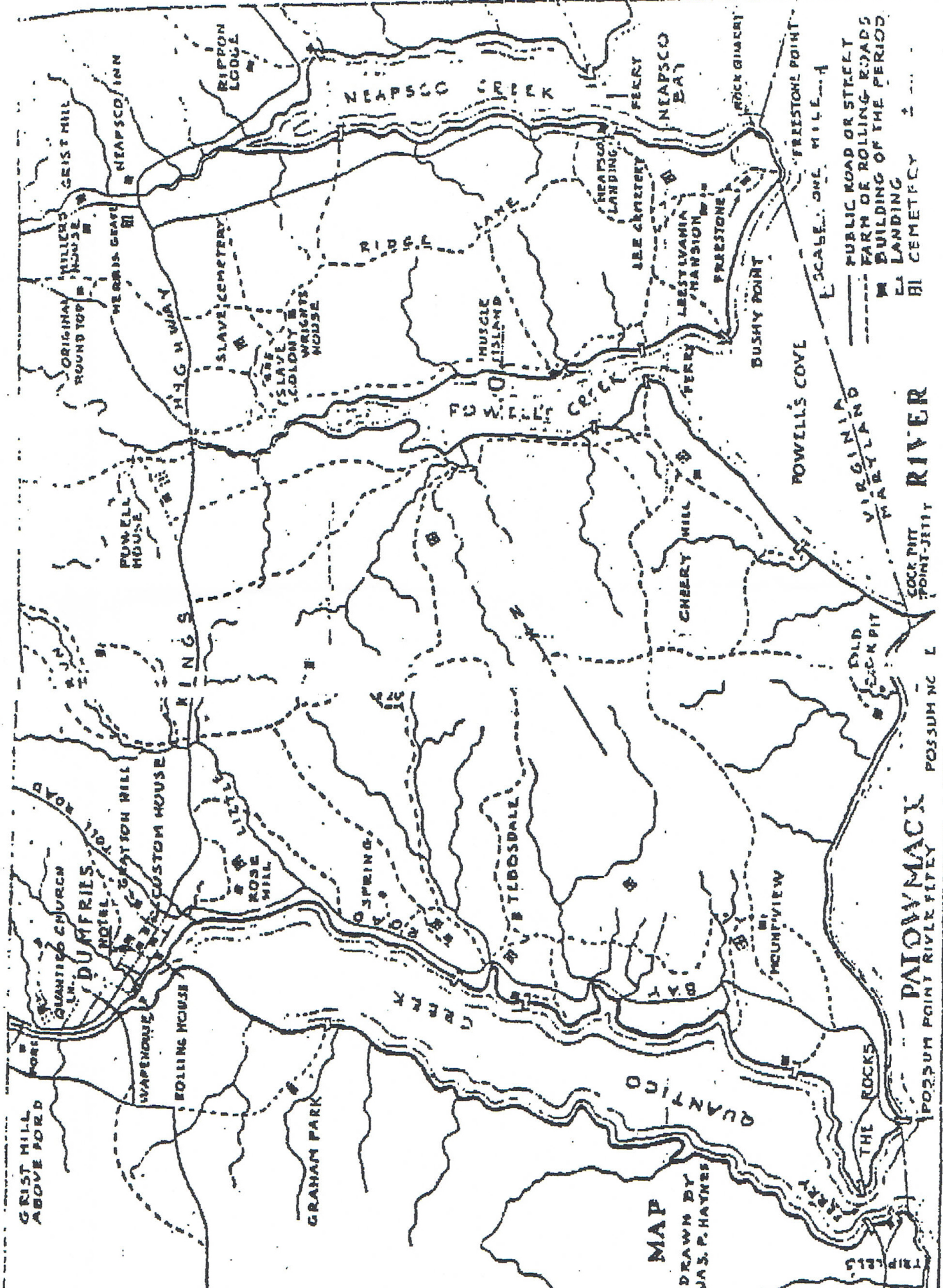
Sources:

1. The Stronghold - A Story of Historic Northern Neck of Virginia and its People Miriam Haynie
2. Tidewater Dynasty - Carely Roberts & Rebecca Seely
3. Landmarks of Old Prince William - Fairfax Harrison
4. Prince William - Its People and Places - WPA History Project
5. Fauquier in the Revolution - T. Triplett Russell, John Gott
6. Washington-Wright Connection Tyler's Quarterly vol. IV - Chas. A. Hoppins

Narrative of Wright Family Background

1. William R. James II - 5th and 6th great grandson of the John Wrights
2. Joseph Williams - 5th and 6th great grandson of the John Wrights

The map which accompanies this article was drawn by James P. Haynes, a resident of Dumfries from 1943 until his death April 11, 1982, and is one of many maps and sketches that he drew. The majority of his work was donated by his widow, Katherine Haynes, to Leesylvania State Park, Weems-Botts Museum, and Potomac High School. Mr. Haynes also wrote a book entitled "Thunderbolt Champ of the Patowmack."



MAP
DRAWN BY
JAS. P. HAYNES

SCALE: ONE MILE
PUBLIC ROAD OR STREET
FARM OF ROLLING ROADS
BUILDING OF THE PERIOD
LANDING
CEMETERY

VIRGINIA
MARYLAND

PAIOWMACK RIVER

POSSUM POINT RIVER FERRY
POSSUM NC

THE ROCKS

OLD SINK PIT

CHERRY HILL

FERRY

MUSCLE ISLAND

BUSHY POINT

POWELL'S COVE

NEAPSCO BAY

NEAPSCO FERRY

NEAPSCO LANDING

LEE CEMETERY

LEESYLVANIA MANSION

PRESTONE

RICK BARNET

FREESTONE POINT

RIPPOON LODGE

SLAVE CEMETERY

WRIGHTS HOUSE

WRIGHTS COLONY

PUNELL HOUSE

HERRIS GRAVE

WILLERS HOUSE

GEIST HILL

NEAPSCO INN

HIGWAY

ORIGINAL ROUND TOP

GRIST MILL ABOVE FORD

QUANTICO RIVER