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Thomas Blackburn: Forgotten Patriot

By Kerry Mitchell

Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Richard Henry Lee, George Mason, Patrick Henry...when thinking about the period before and during the American Revolution these names come up as some of the great Virginians who were involved in the founding of our nation. While these men were great on their own accounts, there were other Virginian men who helped shaped our nation. Thomas Blackburn of Prince William County is one of these who history tends to glance over even though during the 1760s and 1770s, he was an important figure in American history.

Thomas was born in Prince William County around 1742 to Richard and Mary (nee Watts) Blackburn. Richard Blackburn was a native from Ripon, England who came over in the early 1700s and settled in Gloucester County, Virginia before moving to Prince William County in 1733. In addition to being a carpenter and farmer, Richard was involved in Prince William County politics and served as a Justice of the Peace. Not much is known about Thomas's early childhood. He inherited his family home and farm, Rippon Lodge in 1760. That same year he married Christian Scott with whom he had six children with. By 1762, Thomas receives a captain's commission from the governor. With the French

and Indian War ending it is unclear to what extent he served. We do know that in September 1766 he served as a Justice of the Peace for Prince William County. In 1772, Thomas was elected to be one of the Prince William representatives to the House of Burgesses.



Thomas's election to the House coincided with the unrest brewing between the colonists and Great Britain. After the Boston Tea Party and Britain's passage of the Intolerable Acts, Thomas was amongst the group of members who drafted the resolution that called for a day of prayer and fasting for the people of Boston. Lord Dunmore believed the resolution was an insult to King George III and he dissolved the House on May 26th. Thomas was among the 22 ex-members

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who met at Raleigh Tavern and decided they would support a continental boycott of British goods. He went back to Prince William County to have the resolution passed by county leaders (which they did on June 6th). From 1774 -1776, Thomas served in the first four Virginia conventions and involved himself in many committees dealing with the unrest. He was part of the committee that offered George Washington the command of Virginia's militia as well as the committee with George Mason and Henry Lee II that raised troops to defend Virginia. In the spring of 1776, Thomas lost his seat to attend the 5th Virginia Convention to Cuthbert Bullitt.

After losing his seat to Bullitt, Thomas was appointed as a Lt. Colonel of the 2nd Virginia State Regiment. After being passed over for a promotion, Thomas gave in his resignation on June 10, 1777. While he was out of the army officially, Thomas did not stay out of the fight for long. He rejoined the Virginia Militia as a volunteer. He fought at the battle of Germantown, Pennsylvania in October 1777. During this battle, he was wounded in the leg which ended his military career. He returned to Rippon Lodge in Woodbridge, Virginia to continue farming and entertaining his many friends. This included George Washington whom Thomas became related to through marriage when his daughter, Julia Ann, married George's nephew, Bushrod Washington. On July 7, 1807, Thomas passed away at Rippon Lodge where he is buried in the family cemetery.

Did Carlyle know the Blackburns?

Like John Carlyle, there are few letters from Thomas Blackburn (or his father, Richard) that have survived or

that are currently known to historians. Looking at Carlyle's life, knowing of his travels and connections to other Virginia families it is highly likely that John Carlyle may have known both Richard and Thomas Blackburn. As Carlyle appears in Prince William County records by the late 1730s, he may have run into or had his name known by Richard who was involved in Prince William politics. It is a better chance that he may have met and known Thomas Blackburn. While Thomas is 22 years younger than John Carlyle, he was good friends with George Washington as mentioned in the article. There is always the chance that these two men would have overlapped visits with each other while at Mount Vernon. It is mentioned in Washington's diaries that the Blackburn girls would visit Mount Vernon; perhaps they too would run into Sarah and Anne Carlyle when they were there for spinet lessons. Thomas's oldest, Julia, was a few years younger than Anne Carlyle and was said to be accomplished on the pianoforte. We do know that Bushrod Washington had a townhouse here in Alexandria so it is quite possible that Julia Blackburn Washington would have been in the same social circles as Sarah Carlyle Herbert.

There is a connection between the Carlyle and Blackburn families that happens in the 19th Century. Sarah Carlyle Herbert's brother-in-law, Thomas Herbert has a son named Noblet Herbert who marries a Mary Lee Washington. Together they have a son also named Noblet. How does this relate to the Blackburns? Mary Lee Washington Herbert is the sister of John Augustine Washington, George's great-nephew. John's wife is Jane



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Charlotte Blackburn, Thomas's granddaughter. Noblet is, there for, Jane Charlotte Blackburn Washington's nephew and Sarah Carlyle Herbert's great-nephew. While it does not directly link the Carlyle and Blackburn families, it does offer a neat insight to how Virginia families at the time are somehow linked to each other.



From the Washington Federalist .. July 22d, 1807.

COMMUNICATION.

Another Revolutionary Patriot gone?

Departed this life, on the 17th instant, at *Ribbon Lodge*, his Seat in Virginia, COL THOMAS BLACKBURN, one of those firm and unshaken Patriots who fought and bled for that Independence which we now enjoy! at an early period of the Revolution he took a decided part in Favour of the rights and liberties of his country, and at the battle of German Town received a severe and dangerous wound.

Distinguished for his generosity, his bravery, and true sense of honor, he was no less eminent for his hospitality, benevolence and charity. For those domestic virtues which adorn and dignify the human character, he was equally conspicuous—An affectionate husband—in indulgent parent—and a humane master...He has finished a well spent life—he has left an ensullied reputation, and is removed from a world of trouble, to the mansions of infinite and eternal bliss!