The Scottish Origins of Washington, DC

by John King Bellassai

When I first came to our Nation's Capital, Washington, DC, from Texas in 1965, it was to attend Georgetown University where, as an undergraduate, I studied history and government (political science). And for a number of years I lived in Georgetown, now a quaint neighborhood that surrounds the university. Always interested in my Scottish roots, I soon became keenly aware of the Scottish origins of Georgetown and of the broader city of which it is now an integral part.

Large Scottish merchant houses based in Glasgow dominated the tobacco trade on the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers and along the Chesapeake Bay from the early 1740s through to the time of the American Revolution, 35 years later. These truly "international" firms employed "factors" (agents) to represent them on site and sent apprentices from Scotland to work for them there—both as free laborers and as indentured servants. Georgetown was settled by a group of such Scottish merchants in 1745, as a tobacco port town. In fact, Scots so predominated there in its early years that the place's original name was "Little Scotland." A group of prominent Scottish merchants and landowners long governed this modest-sized port town, under a formal and exclusive delegation of power from the Maryland Assembly, from the middle of the 18th century until well after the American Revolution. These Scottish dynasties—the Bealls, Gordons, Peters, Magruders, Dunlops, Davidsons, Bowies, and others—put a clearly Scottish stamp on Georgetown during the first century or more of its existence.

In 1751, the Maryland Provincial Assembly appointed eight Commissioners to formally lay out a town and once laid out, to govern it. Of the eight original Commissioners, at least six were Scots (George Beall, Josiah Beall, Henry Wright Crabb, George Gordon, and James Perrie). From 1754 until 1785, 11 "Successor Commissioners" were appointed from time to time by the Maryland Assembly to fill vacancies in the ranks of the original eight. Of these additional 11, at least seven were Scots (Robert Peter, John Murdoch, Thomas Beall, Benjamin Stoddert, Samuel Davidson, John Peter, and Adam Steuart).

The survey of the town that would come to be called "George Towne" (later Georgetown) was completed in 1752. Portions of George Beall's land and George Gordon's adjacent land were found "most convenient" for the laying out of the new town (which was *not* named for King George but rather for the two Scotsmen from whose land the town was created). Meetings of the Commissioners of George Towne were held at least once annually every year from 1751 until 1789, when at last the town was incorporated. The first Mayor of the newly incorporated Georgetown in 1790 was Robert Peter, a second generation Scot and a major Georgetown landowner and merchant.

In 1780, a small congregation of Presbyterians, mainly Scots, who had previously met informally in private houses, founded a church in Georgetown, under the leadership of Rev. Stephen Bloomer Balch, a pupil of Scots-born John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.   Subsequently called Georgetown Presbyterian Church, it exists to this day and

is the oldest continuously operating Christian congregation in Washington, DC. Many of the Scots-born founders of Georgetown are buried in the kirkyard of Georgetown Presbyterian.

When the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1790, Article I, Section 8, Paragraph 17 created a federal enclave, the District of Columbia, from land donated by both Maryland and Virginia. The existing port of Georgetown was assimilated from that year onward into the newly created District of Columbia. Following on the creation by Congress of the District of Columbia, Washington City began to be constructed within its confines in 1791—much of it on land purchased from gentleman farmer David Burnes—grandson of a Scottish immigrant of the same name who at his death in 1760 had owned 700 acres of prime bottom land near Tiber Creek and the Potomac. It was from these landholdings on which much of "official" Washington was to be built.

This third generation Scot was "the obstinate Mr. Burnes" who for a long period refused to sell his extensive land holdings to President Washington for the erection of the Federal City.   But eventually he did. On that land, for which Burnes reluctantly accepted $1 million from the new United States Government, now sits the south side of the US Capitol Building, the entire Washington Mall, most of the President's House (the White House), all of the Treasury Department, all of the Ellipse behind the White House, and all of Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol Building to the White House. Holding extensive property adjacent to Burnes was another prosperous second-generation Scot, the merchant and gentleman farmer Samuel Davidson. From the sale by Davidson of an extensive plot to the new Federal Government in 1790 now is located the north side of the White House and Lafayette Square, directly across from it, on Pennsylvania Avenue.

A quite famous Scottish-American resident of early Washington City was Colonel Benjamin Stoddert—one of the three Commissioners appointed by President Washington to plan the location of the Capitol Building and other key Federal Government buildings. The grandson of an early Scottish immigrant to Maryland, Stoddert was a major figure in the early years of the Republic. A staunch Federalist and close friend of General (later President) Washington, it was Stoddert who conceived the name for the new capital: "Washington City." A wealthy man, Stoddert lived and entertained in Georgetown. But his tobacco business, like most commercial activity in the Port of Georgetown, suffered a severe decline because of the War of 1812 and the consequent British embargo on American exports. (Stoddert died in 1813.)

Georgetown remains a part of the District of Columbia to this day. It lost its status as a separate town within DC in 1871 when it was administratively merged with Washington City into what, after that date, came to be called simply, "Washington, DC."

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