HUGH MERCER,
AN AMERICAN SUCCESS STORY

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Please allow me to note a thing or two to anyone who reads this draft of my thesis. First, I feel that the prose is rather dry and that the paper neglects to explore some of the more interesting aspects of Mercer's experience, particularly those areas that Fredericksburg residents would find of interest. However, the paper is in the style required by my professor, who prohibited editorializing and equivocal statements and had no interest in Mercer's descendents. Further, if any readers notice factual errors, I hope that they will pencil in notations and cite the sources. I may rework this thesis at a later date and I welcome written suggestions.

According to Benjamin Franklin in 1763, the previous three years had brought 10,000 families from Pennsylvania to North Carolina alone.[50] While many headed for the frontier, Mercer himself moved to Fredericksburg, Virginia, a small town in Spotsylvania County at the fall line of the Rappahannock River. He chose this town largely due Washington's suggestion and influence. Washington had grown up across the river at Ferry Farm in King George County, and his mother and sister still lived in town.

A second influence in Mercer's choice could have been his future brother-in-law and best friend, Colonel George Weedon, also a native of the Fredericksburg area. For some time at Presqu'Isle, there were only nineteen officers present, among them Weedon and Mercer.[51] As it was uncommon for officers to mix with the rank and file, and because of these individuals' future relationship, one can surmise that Weedon knew Mercer at Presqu'Isle and helped convince him to try his hand at life in Fredericksburg.

By February 12, 1761, Mercer had arrived in the burgeoning small town. On this day he wrote to Bouquet from Fredericksburg that he had "determined upon applying myself to the Practise of Physick," and that "this place was recomended as likely to afford a genteel subsistence in that Way...." Mercer further remarked that, "from the reception I met with from the Gentlemen here, (I) have reason to imagine it worthy a few months trial."[52]

Fredericksburg, Virginia was a young and small town: a fifty acre parcel

[50] Bernard Bailyn, Voyagers to the West, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1986), p.15.

[51] Papers of Henry Bouquet, vol.IV, p.651.

[52] Ibid, vol.V, p.290.

chartered in 1727. Not all of its 1/4 acre lots had even been sold and built on, and the church, pollbooth, gallows, and pillory were all within 130 yards of each other.[53] As late as 1763, homes had wooden chimneys, and hogs ran loose in the streets.[54] As provincial as it was, Fredericksburg was at the same time an important port, serving as the major mercantile and business center for the Western counties. Tobacco was the area's primary business; in fact, tobacco certificates were a primary form of money in the town until the Revolution.[55]

This was the town in which Mercer would settle for fifteen years. Here Mercer accumulated property, doctored the elite, got married and raised a family [redacted], and became a prominent citizen.

Mercer was apparently quick to utilize his contacts. His patients included George Washington, Washington's mother Mary and epileptic stepdaughter Patsy Custis, and the father of future president James Madison.[56] In his first two years in Fredericksburg, Mercer married Isabella Gordon, daughter of deceased prominent citizen John Gordon. He became brother-in-law to Lieutenant George Weedon when Weedon married Isabella's sister. In 1763, he leased an old tavern for his medical practice and he soon after paid a handsome sum for a lot and home around the corner from it where he lived

[53] John T. Goolrick, Fredericksburg and The Cavalier Country, (Richmond, VA: Garrett and Massie, 1935, p.17.

[54] Edward Alvey, Jr., The Streets of Fredericksburg, (Fredericksburg, VA: Mary Washington College Foundation, Inc., 1978), p.14.

[55] Goolrick, Fredericksburg, p.17.

[56] Bugay Collection.

throughout his stay in Fredericksburg.[57]

Mercer's medical practice was very lucrative. He soon was able to purchase property in Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County, as well as in Kentucky and Pennsylvania.[58] He also accumulated the capital to help found an apothecary shop, which was also profitable. On June 6, 1771, he and one Ewen Clements advertised their partnership as apothecaries, and on July 9, 1772, he advertised a new partnership with a John Julian.[59] Mercer did business on Main Street in the center of town, though never in the building now occupied by the Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop Museum.[60] In the partnership with Clements, Mercer received a disproportionate two-thirds of the proceeds, and from 1771 to 1773, Mercer had 243 accounts. His more than 100 local patients were primarily prominent merchants, craftsmen, tavernkeepers, and other members of the gentry.[61]

Mercer's success and prominence in Fredericksburg is further evidenced by his

[57] Paula S. Felder, Fielding Lewis and His Times: Life in 18th Century Fredericksburg, (Unfinished and unpublished as of September 22, 1992), p.76.

[58] Hugh Mercer, "Last Will and Testament of Hugh Mercer," Will Book E, Folio 169, Spotsylvania County Courthouse, March 20, 1776.

[59] The Virginia Gazette, (Williamsburg, VA: Alexander Purdie and John Dixon), June 6, 1771, p.3, and July 9, 1772, p.3.

[60] Paula S. Felder, Interview by Richard S. Starling, Fredericksburg, VA, September 22, 1992.
The building currently called the Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop Museum is actually a nineteenth century structure, originally known as "Henderson's Store." A history of the leasing of the building rented by Mercer reveals it to be the same building once leased by a Barbara Jones as a tavern, a building no longer standing, but which is known to have stood on Main Street one block north of the Museum.

[61] Felder, Fielding Lewis, p.82.

membership in Masonic Lodge Number Four. This chapter, which began meeting long before it was officially chartered and named, was one of the nation's first, and was the meeting place of such national leaders as George Washington, and later, General Lafayette.[62] The Lodge was "a social group which came together for a good time."[63] Sometimes, perhaps, the members enjoyed themselves too much, for once, the tavern of one Mrs. Jones was reimbursed for thirteen broken glasses.[64]

Only six weeks after his arrival in Fredericksburg, Mercer was inducted into this order as an "Entered Apprentice."[65] Though Washington provided the impetus to the Lodge's ready acceptance of Mercer, his ensuing success can be attributed to his personal characteristics. He was amiable, outspoken, and dedicated. As the "Grand Lodge" was in Scotland and many members of Lodge Number Four were Scottish, Mercer's Scottish heritage certainly did not hinder his progress, either. He advanced in the Masonic hierarchy until the highest degree, that of Master Mason, was conferred on him in 1767. Only roughly one in six Masons achieved this status in that era.[66]

It is wrongly averred that Mercer was a member of the vestry of St. George's

[62] Ronald E. Heaton, The Lodge at Fredericksburgh: A Digest of the Early Records Abstracted from the Record Book of Minutes, 1752-1771, (Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1976), pp.vii, 36.

[63] Ibid, p.75.

[64] Ibid, p.9.

[65] Ibid, p.83.

[66] Ibid, pp. 25, 83.

Church--Fredericksburg's oldest, and the only church of his time.[67] In all likelihood, however, Mercer did attend St. George's, at least monthly as required by law, and he did help sponsor a lottery to raise funds for church renovation in July of 1769.[68] Further, the church at least once gave Mercer funds to compensate him for aiding indigent citizens of Fredericksburg.[69]

Some idea of Mercer's character is found in the diary of an Englishman named Smyth, who visited Fredericksburg in 1774 as part of a tour of the colonies. In his diary, Smyth wrote, "In Fredericksburg I called upon a worthy and intimate friend, Doctor Hugh Mercer, a physician of great merit and eminence, and as a man, possessed of almost every virtue and accomplishment...." He added that, "Doctor Mercer was generally of a just and a moderate way of thinking, and possessed liberal sentiments, and a generosity of principle...."[70]

Mercer was a prominent figure in Fredericksburg social life, which was centered at the town's two or three taverns. He was practically a fixture at his brother-in-law's pub, the records of which point to him as the establishment's most frequent patron. His account in the ledger at Weedon's tavern ran the longest at three pages. "A very convivial toper, indeed," Hugh Mercer is called by Fredericksburg historian Paula Felder.

[67] Carrol Quenzel Hunter, The History and Background of St. George's Episcopal Church, Fredericksburg, Virginia, (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders and Sons, 1951), pp.90-91.

[68] Bugay Collection, excerpt from a July, 1768 article in The Virginia Gazette.

[69] Bugay Collection, from "Saint George's Vestry Meeting Notes, 1760-1775."

[70] J. F. D. Smyth, A Tour in the United States of America, (London: G. Robinson, J. Robson, and J. Sewell, 1784), vol.2, p.154.

"He visited almost weekly...and he was a big spender."[71] Mercer's big spending points to him as one of the town's leading political activists, too, for the taverns were centers of political and social discourse in eighteenth century Fredericksburg.

The political climate of Virginia changed in 1774 and 1775 as the House of Burgesses grew increasingly at odds with the British-appointed Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore. In 1774, when the Virginia legislature supported Boston in its defiance of the Intolerable Acts, Dunmore dissolved the House. It continued to meet as the Virginia Convention and became increasingly revolutionary, and Dunmore eventually became frightened enough of local insurrection that he removed twenty kegs of powder from the magazine in Williamsburg to a man-of-war anchored near Yorktown.

At about the same time that news of this controversial event would have reached Fredericksburg, there is an extraordinarily large entry in Mercer's account at Weedon's tavern. This suggests that Mercer bought rounds of drinks for the fellow townsmen with whom he was debating the state of colonial politics.[72] It was also after this event that Mercer embarked on his military career in the American Revolution, a career which would lead him upward through the Virginia militia, and to his death with the Continental Army in Washington's northern campaign.

The first step for Mercer and other Fredericksburg leaders in reacting to Dunmore's removal of the powder from Williamsburg was to mobilize local opinion.

[71] Paula S. Felder, Unpublished text of a speech/slide show presentation given as part of a series sponsored by the Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, Inc. in June, 1992.

[72] Felder, Interview.

Already an officer in the Spotsylvania County militia which was headquartered in Fredericksburg, Mercer gathered a force of seven hundred. Mercer, Weedon, and two other prominent citizens composed a letter to George Washington in Williamsburg, declaring the Governor's activities there a "public insult ... not to be tamely submitted to," and announcing their resolve to march on Williamsburg the following Saturday. Mercer signed his name first.[73] Washington persuaded the Fredericksburg residents to refrain, and a representative council of the Northern Virginia militias that included Mercer decided to stand ready to act against unjust and wicked invasion when called upon. Mercer spent the summer of 1775 raising troops and drilling militia on the courthouse green.[74]

Patriotic feelings were still running high in August of 1775 when, in response to increased British military activity in the Norfolk area, the Virginia Convention authorized three regiments for the defense of the colony. Before the Convention voted for the Colonelcy of the first regiment, it determined to confer the position of Commander in Chief on whoever was selected. The primary nominees for the position were Patrick Henry, who announced for the position from Philadelphia, and Hugh Mercer, advocated by experienced military men. Though Mercer led on the first ballot, he failed to gain a majority, and Patrick Henry won in a run-off. Washington, one of Mercer's foremost

[73] Peter Force, American Archives: Consisting of a Collection of Authentick Records, State Papers, ... Fourth Series, (Washington: M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, 1837-1846), vol.II, p.387.

[74] Oscar H. Darter, Colonial Fredericksburg and Neighborhood in Perspective, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1957), p.197.

advocates, was dismayed, particularly when Hugh Mercer was not selected to lead either of the other two regiments.[75] However, while his friends at the convention were indignant about his not being elected, Mercer responded that in the Virginia militia there was ample opportunity for all who wanted to serve, and that he himself would serve in any way his fellow colonists desired.[76] While many saw the military as a game, as a social ladder, and as a chance at fame, Mercer reaffirmed his dedication to the cause of liberty and stated his commitment to the goals of the colonies.

Mercer returned to local service, becoming Colonel of Minutemen for Spotsylvania and surrounding counties on September 12,[77] and a member of the Committee of Safety of Spotsylvania County on November 17.[78] Though he did not seek the appointment, Mercer began service on the state level when on January 11, 1776, the Virginia convention elected him Colonel of the 3rd Virginia Regiment.[79] Mercer reported to Williamsburg for duty promptly and began organizing troops.

Also in January, Continental commissions for Virginia officers arrived from Philadelphia. Patrick Henry, disappointed with his modest appointment, soon resigned from the military, throwing Virginia forces into disarray. Realizing Henry had been

[75] John E. Selby, The Revolution in Virginia, 1775-1783, (Williamsburg: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1988), p.50.

[76] Waterman, p.94.

[77] The Virginia Gazette, (Williamsburg: Alexander Purdie), August 22, 1775.

[78] The William and Mary College Quarterly (Richmond: The College of William and Mary, 1896), vol.5, p.249.

[79] Purdie, Alexander, ed., Proceedings of the Convention of Delegates, (Williamsburg: Alexander Purdie, 1776), p.92.

slighted, his men of the 1st Regiment nearly rioted and demanded their discharges. Henry, to his credit, used his eloquence to subdue his troops, but the near mutiny was as much a testimonial to lax discipline in the ranks as to Henry's popularity.[80]

Mercer was unofficially designated to reform troop behavior and bring professionalism to Williamsburg. His task was not always easy: in one celebrated incident, he so upbraided the wild and destructive men of Lieutenant George Gibson's rifle unit that Gibson demanded and received a formal apology. Though the details of the incident are unknown, Mercer admitted that he exceeded the limits of his authority in rebuking the soldiers and temporarily jailing several.[81] However, he followed his perfunctory apology in The Virginia Gazette with the question, "whose deviation from duty was most injurious to that company, and to the cause in which we are engaged...: That of the officer who quells a mutinous spirit in the troops, or of those officers who .... obliged me to take the trouble of reducing their men to some degree of military order?"[82] Though he had learned that the best manner of fighting in the colonies was more Indian than British in style, he demanded strict discipline of his subordinates.

In February, 1776, Mercer dissolved his medical practice in Fredericksburg.[83] In March, he wrote a detailed last will and testament that provided that his wife and children take over his myriad of properties in the event of his death. Though they never

[80] Selby, pp.88-89.

[81] The Virginia Gazette, (Williamsburg: John Dixon and William Hunter), March 30, 1776.

[82] The Virginia Gazette, (Purdie), April 19, 1776.

[83] Ibid, February 9, 1776.

did so, the will also provided that they live at Washington's boyhood home, Ferry Farm, which Mercer had recently purchased from George Washington.[84]

Mercer spent the spring positioning troops in Virginia's Northern Neck to guard against British invasion. Meanwhile, the British had decided that New York City would be the focal point of a British charge to end colonial insurrection. By taking New York, they aimed to separate New England from the rest of the colonies, and thereby to divide and conquer the rebels. Thus, under Sir William Howe, 10,000 men landed on Staten Island on July 2, 1776. He quickly and without opposition built his forces to 30,000 over the following weeks and stationed a tremendous naval fleet at the mouth of the Hudson. George Washington, determined to hold New York City, set up headquarters on Long Island and had his troops entrench themselves at Brooklyn Heights, directly between the British and Manhattan. He also built thirteen forts on Manhattan Island alone and barricaded every street that touched the river lest the British gain a foothold.[85]

The Continental Congress authorized a "Flying Camp": a highly mobile group designed to help shield New Jersey and points further south from British advances. It would also be a source of new troops for George Washington's forces. Washington recommended that Mercer's long military service be recognized by his appointment to head the Flying Camp, and he was made Brigadier General of the Continental Army in

[84] Mercer, Will.

[85] Thomas Fleming, 1776, Year of Illusions, (New York: W.W. Norton and Sons, 1975), p.293.