

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria
COMMUNITY MEDIA

Journal provides glimpse of loyalist's time in Alexandria

"The people are arming and training in every place. They are all liberty mad." -Journal of Nicholas Cresswell, Feb. 18, 1775

In a city that celebrates its ties to the American Revolution, it is easy to forget that not all Alexandria residents supported independence. Our best source of loyalist sentiment in the city is the Journal of Nicholas Cresswell.

Cresswell was born in Edale, Derbyshire, England, in 1750. He arrived in Alexandria in July 1774, which coincided with the adoption of the Fairfax Resolves, written in Alexandria, although his journal does not mention them.

As a new arrival to Alexandria, it is possible that Cresswell never meshed with the residents who had been in town since its founding in 1749. His short time in town was marked by disagreement with many townspeople about their desire to be independent of the British Crown.

Cresswell found that then, as so often today, much of the talk in Alexandria revolved around politics. He objected to the sermons that he heard

at the Presbyterian Meeting House, calling the clergy "mere retailers of politics, sowers of sedition and rebellion."

Despite disagreeing with more established Alexandrians, Cresswell mentions attending a ball on Jan. 7, 1775, and eating at taverns in which he argued fervently with other patrons. He claimed that the women at the ball were "fond of dancing, but I do not think they perform it with the greatest elegance."

One can ask if Cresswell found Alexandrians so disagreeable, why didn't he leave, especially after he began to fear that his political opinions would land him in jail.

His journal shows that he tried to leave multiple times. In April 1775, he took a job as a surveyor in Illinois but returned to Alexandria in October 1775 without employment or success.

His public disagreements with those who favored Virginia's independence led the locally appointed Committee of Safety to track his movements. He wrote that the "Committee of this town will not permit me



PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

Alexandria's pre-1776 history includes that of Nicholas Cresswell, loyalist and momentary Alexandria resident.

to depart this Colony as they look upon me to be a Spy."

Another attempt to leave in October 1775 was thwarted. He tried again in the summer of 1776, with the help of Thomson Mason, brother of Alexandria patriot George Mason, but violated an agreement with the Committee of Safety not to leave Virginia and had to return to Alexandria after he was captured.

He tried to leave again in the Spring of 1777 with his friend Colin Keir, even after Virginia Governor Patrick Henry denied his request. Cresswell and Keir set sail, claiming their destination was Gloucester, but searched for the British fleet instead. They

found the HMS Phoenix, which took them to New York.

Keir volunteered for the British forces, but Cresswell honored a promise to Thomson Mason not to take up arms against the colonists and returned to England in August 1777.

In three short years, Nicholas Cresswell's view of Virginia went from one of agricultural opportunity to one he viewed as "the seat of slavery, confusion, and lawless oppression."

For updates on America 250 events in Alexandria, please visit alexandriava.gov/america250.

*Out of the Attic is
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