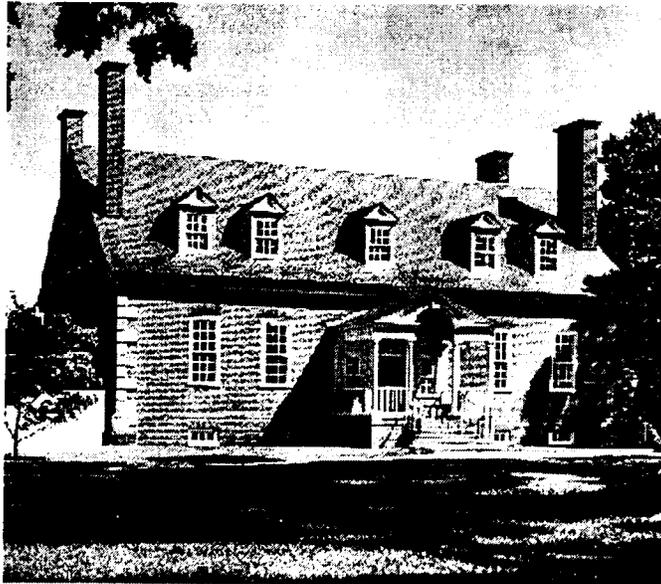




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Courtesy of Gunston Hall, Mason Neck, Virginia

Gunston Hall

Viewing Alexandria from the Perspective of Gunston Hall: George Mason's Associations with the Colonial Port Town

by Andrew S. Veech, Ph.D.

This paper, part two in the series and written by Gunston Hall Archaeologist Andrew S. Veech, Ph.D., examines the general relationship between patrician planters and their neighboring towns, specifically focusing on the relationship between land owner and patriot George Mason and the developing town of Alexandria.

Let me begin my talk today with a remark about history: History, and by this I mean the scholarly craft of doing historical research, is a sobering thing. While history almost always presents us with new and clearer insights

about the past, it oftentimes delivers to us a past quite different from the one we had been expecting. Long-cherished assumptions about the past can be shattered instantaneously if they are confronted by documented facts that challenge those assumptions' validity. For the historical researcher, discoveries like these initially can prove more unsettling than satisfying, since they jar us from our complacent images of previous eras and force us to reassess those eras with new findings in mind.

I experienced just such a jarring awakening as

I investigated the Mason family's relationship with the town of Alexandria. I began this historical research expecting to uncover many strong, warm connections tying George Mason to Alexandria. Soon afterwards, however, I was struck by how markedly different Mason's Alexandria dealings in fact were - both in their number and kind.

George Mason, the sagely statesman of Gunston Hall Plantation, not on rosy terms with Alexandria? How could this be? Even to suggest the notion in the midst of this celebration of Alexandria seems almost uncouth. Yet, despite my genuine initial intention to paint George Mason's relation with Alexandria positively, the historical documents I assembled simply prevented me from doing so. Like a splash of cold water across my back, the records jounced me from my comfortable preconceptions and compelled me to view Mason's town connections as they really were, rather than how I felt they ought to have been. An initially disturbing experience, I confess. But one that now, I trust, brings our collective notions about Alexandria's 18th-century beginnings more in line with actual conditions and events.

To breach this subject of George Mason and Alexandria, it is important for us to first recall the prevailing attitudes that colonial Virginians held about towns prior to roughly 1750. After all, George Mason was very much a colonial Virginian - a fourth-generation Virginian, to be precise - so such attitudes about towns must certainly have colored his own. Unlike their Massachusetts cousins, colonial Virginians did not quickly embrace the notion of town formation. Quite to the contrary, Virginians showed almost no interest in building towns for more than a century after their landing at Jamestown. And the main cause for their disinterest, as we

know, was the colony's chief cash crop - tobacco.

Most Virginians earned their living farming tobacco, and profitable tobacco farming demanded lots of land. Intensive monocropping of tobacco depleted fields of nutrients after just several years, requiring those fields to lie fallow for a time while others were planted instead. Still more land was needed to grow corn, orchards, and timber, and ideally some of that property would be river-front acreage in order to facilitate the transport of cured tobacco crops back to awaiting British markets. The cumulative result of these land requirements was a dispersed Virginia population which was strung out along the banks of the colony's waterways.

Virginians did gather together periodically at certain public places: the parish church, the county court house, the racing ground, the militia field, and the ordinary. And they did maintain a colonial capital, first at Jamestown and later at Williamsburg. But these public gatherings were uncommon, and the colonial capital languished whenever the House of Burgesses was not in session. Moreover, these practices of social interaction can hardly be termed as urban. At best they were proto-urban - something short of true town life. Tobacco lay at the heart of this behavior, effectively quashing Virginians' incentive to become town-dwellers. And the tobacco-induced inertia persisted, until the Williamsburg government finally forced a change in 1730.

That change came in the form of Governor Gooch's Tobacco Act - a piece of legislation that, through its demands on the colony's staple crop, eventually led to a credible form of Virginia town life. Before the 1730 Tobacco Act, Virginians typically conducted

their transatlantic commerce from the private wharves of their counties' largest plantations. British vessels docked at such wharves once or twice annually, off-loading British manufactures and then taking on locally-grown tobacco. Even though this commercial pattern persisted for decades, the problems inherent to it were great. First of all, neither inspection regulations nor production controls existed under the system, so tons of low-grade, "trash" tobacco flooded into Britain unchecked, sinking the crop's overall value. Second, would-be Virginia merchants were discouraged from starting up businesses since there were no profitable locations for them to build shops.

The 1730 Tobacco Act rectified these problems by commanding the erection and maintenance of county warehouses in which to inspect locally-grown tobacco crops prior to their shipment to Britain. Such official warehouses were to be sufficiently dispersed within each county, accessible to every planter in that locale. These warehouses were to be manned by officially selected county tobacco inspectors, who would approve only quality-grade tobacco for export and burn all the rest. After inspection, planters were issued tobacco notes, indicating the amount of passing-grade tobacco they had stored at the warehouses. These notes quickly circulated throughout Virginia as legal tender.

Certainly, the Tobacco Act improved Virginia's economy. It raised the crop's going rate in Britain by stemming the export of trash tobacco. This gave planters larger lines of credit for that tobacco which they did manage to sell. But more importantly, the law jump-started the growth of towns by creating fixed places within Virginia's rural counties where planters assembled to conduct business. Towns cropped up throughout Virginia between 1730 and 1760, and most developed

around the tobacco warehouses which the Tobacco Act had created. And to these towns came Scottish and English merchants who felt that Virginia at last might prove a profitable commercial venture with sufficient aggregates of potential customers. These immigrant merchants built stores near the new tobacco warehouses, selling goods to local planters and their families. The new mercantile stores in turn encouraged the growth of other town businesses, most notably taverns. In this way, a stable, town-based commercial economy developed in Virginia, which ultimately outlasted tobacco itself.

Fairfax County, the county of interest to us here, demonstrates this process of tobacco warehouse establishment developing into town incorporation and commercial growth. Between 1742 and 1760, the Fairfax court justices specified the building of four warehouses at points within the county: the Hunting Creek warehouse, the Falls warehouse, the Pohick Bay warehouse, and the Occoquan warehouse. Towns soon coalesced around the Hunting Creek and Occoquan warehouses. Both of these new towns - Alexandria, founded in 1749, and Colchester, founded in 1753 - were incorporated through the financial backing of wealthy local trustees - large planters like George Mason. Many of the two towns' first residents were Scottish- or English-born merchants.

In general, Fairfax planters delivered their tobacco crops to the nearest, most convenient warehouse, regardless of whether or not it lay within a town. Thus, both the Pohick Bay and Falls warehouses continued to receive tobacco traffic, even after the towns of Alexandria and Colchester were established. Many of the region's largest planters cultivated tobacco fields throughout Fairfax County and nearby jurisdictions like Prince William and Stafford

counties, and as a result stored their hogsheads at numerous warehouses. Certainly, it was in these men's best economic interests to see all warehouse districts prosper and turn into towns - Alexandria and Colchester to be sure, but also Aquia, Quantico, Marlborough and other such places.

With this prefatory information laid out, we can now begin to perceive early Alexandria as George Mason viewed it from his vantage point at Gunston Hall. What Mason saw in the 1750s was a town exhibiting real promise for sustained growth and prosperity. The Fairfax County courthouse moved to Alexandria in 1752, a number of ordinaries sprang up along its streets throughout the decade, and by 1759 even a shipyard was in operation along the town's riverbank.

But as exciting as these urban developments must have seemed to George Mason, they were just some of the events taking place within his larger northern Virginia world. Other expansions just as exciting and full of promise were occurring at neighboring northern Virginia towns, likewise born out of the 1730 Tobacco Act. For example, at Dumfries, also founded in 1749, commercial traffic grew at such a rate that the town's first tobacco warehouses had to be enlarged twice during the town's first decade of life, first in 1753 and again in 1759. And at Colchester, entrepreneur John Ballentine erected an impressive industrial complex known as the "Occoquan works," which by 1759 included an iron furnace, a forge, two sawmills, and a bolting mill. In sum, Mason's whole northern Virginia landscape was awash in urban growth during the 1750s, and there was nothing so especially unique about Alexandria's growth at that time to suggest that it would succeed in the long-term, at the expense of its neighbors.

Mason, from his 1750s-1760s vantage point,

almost certainly could not foresee Alexandria's eventual dominance since he kept his urban dealings and investments diversified throughout that time, rather than concentrating them in Alexandria alone. In 1754, Mason began serving as an Alexandria trustee. But he simultaneously served as a trustee of Dumfries, a post he had held since that town's 1749 incorporation. Mason purchased finished consumer goods from various Alexandria merchants, yet he also shopped at Colchester, Dumfries, and even Piscataway, Maryland, and did far more



George Mason (1725-1792)

business at those three locales. And Mason transported portions of his tobacco and wheat crops to Alexandria for processing and shipment, while at the same time bringing the remainder of those crops to Colchester. It is evident, therefore, that Alexandria was just one of several northern Virginia towns with which Mason was involved.

Courtesy of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

This is not to imply that George Mason held any sort of antipathy toward Alexandria. Rather, it is to show that colonial Alexandria's long-term prosperity was by no means a foregone conclusion either to Mason or to the rest of Fairfax County's predominantly rural, agrarian population. Rural tobacco farming had been the norm in Virginia for generations and, in the minds of many Fairfax County farmers, would probably continue to be so. Towns, on the other hand, were to them something new and experimental. Given these outlooks, Mason's somewhat tempered investments in Alexandria become more understandable. At one level, they reflect Mason's "wait-and-see" attitude towards Alexandria specifically, since to him it was just one of several newly-established towns, any one of which might eventually come to dominate northern Virginia commerce. At another level, though, I think they reflect colonial Virginians' guarded optimism toward town life generally. With some luck, Alexandria and its neighboring towns would survive and thrive, transforming Virginia's economy. On the other hand, towns had been tried before and had failed. In the face of such experience, it seemed prudent for Mason and other large farmers to hedge their bets: Invest some assets in this town and some in that one, but for the most part keep one's wealth invested as it always had been, and that was in one's plantation.

Briefly, let me now mention some of Mason's specific Alexandria investments, infrequent and insubstantial as they were.

Real estate denoted Mason's most tangible investment in Alexandria, and he bought three town lots there between 1752 and 1755 - one on the corner of King and Fairfax streets, and two on opposite corners of King and Royal streets. Mason retained these three properties just for a ten-year period, however, selling

them all by October, 1762. Tradition has long held that one of these lots served as Mason's town office, similar to George Washington's townhouse on Cameron Street, but surviving documents do not substantiate this. Instead, they suggest that Mason leased these properties to tenants, and hence probably spent little time there himself.

As for his commercial activities, Mason maintained accounts with at least four Alexandria mercantile firms between 1754 and 1781, including the firms of Ramsay - Dixon, John Glassford, Jenifer & Hooe, and Richard Harrison. Collectively, Mason's purchases from these firms are varied, reflecting the range of British consumer goods that a gentleman planter typically bought for his plantation household. Some of these items were hardware, probably used in the day-to-day work chores around Gunston Hall: "1 Scythe @ £0.11.0," "1 hand Vice @ £0.1.4," and "3 padlocks for £0.1.3." Other items were textiles, likely sewn into clothing by the Gunston Hall seamstress: "10yds Silk ferrit @13d," "2yds Riband @6d," and "13yds Irish Linen @20d." And still other items were exotic spices and foodstuffs, intended for the Mason dinner table: "2 flasks of Florence Oile @£0.3.8 1/4," "2ounce Nutmegs @ £0.1.2," and "20lbs Coffee @ £0.10.0."

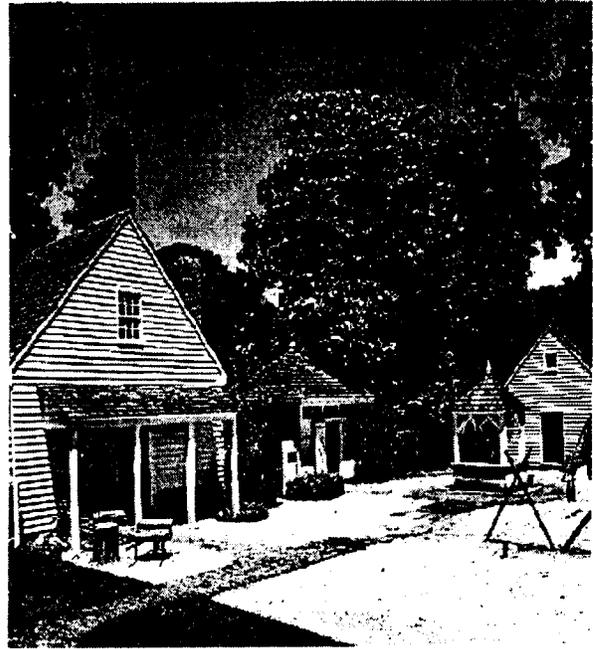
Despite the diversity of these store purchases, their overall numbers are small, exhibiting Mason's tendency to shop outside of Alexandria. Mason's comparatively extensive store accounts in Dumfries and Colchester indicate that he shopped much more often in those towns, to the degree that he shopped in any Virginia towns at all. Like other large planters, Mason continued ordering many of his household luxuries directly from merchants in Europe, who then shipped those goods straight to Gunston Hall.

Alexandria's flour mills, more so than its merchant shops, did attract Mason, particularly from the mid-1770s onward. After 1775, records show Mason routinely hauling thousands of bushels of wheat and corn to Alexandria, even as he continued transporting tobacco elsewhere. This observation is significant for two reasons. First, it reflects how grain cultivation was gradually eclipsing traditional tobacco cultivation as the 18th century drew toward a close. And second, it shows Alexandria's shrewd adaptation to those new agricultural circumstances, building mills that eventually would displace the tobacco warehouses at Colchester and Dumfries.

Yet certain clues suggest that Mason came to acknowledge Alexandria's growing prominence on the northern Virginia landscape, regardless of whether or not he approved of that prominence. As if to secure his family's position in his changing, more urban Fairfax County, Mason apprenticed his two youngest sons to Alexandria merchants. John, Mason's eighth living child, was sent to work with William Hartshorne, a prosperous Quaker wheat trader. And Thomas, Mason's youngest son, was apprenticed to one Mr. Hodgson, to be trained as a businessman.

Historian Robert Rutland once called George Mason the "reluctant statesman." Here I am characterizing Mason as Alexandria's "reluctant town father." Ambivalent about Alexandria's role in Fairfax County's future, Mason largely avoided the town, remaining for the most part at Gunston Hall.

Mason's first loyalty was to Gunston Hall and, by extension, to the privileged, rural lifestyle that Gunston Hall represented. Town life appealed to him little, and was simply viewed as a means of maintaining his squire's existence.



Courtesy of Gunston Hall

Gunston Hall's kitchen yard

As a postscript, it is fitting to point out that George Mason's descendants forged many important and intimate ties with Alexandria as the years went by. Thomson Francis Mason, grandson of George, was elected mayor of Alexandria four times, and he served as president of the Alexandria Canal Company. Today, one can find his grave at the Christ Church Cemetery on Wilkes Street.



Andrew Veech is an archaeologist who specializes in the 18th-century society of the Chesapeake region. He received his undergraduate degree in history from the University of Virginia and earned his doctoral degree in anthropology at Brown University, where he also conducted his graduate training in historical archaeology. An Alexandria native, Veech holds an abiding fascination with northern Virginia's colonial past and currently directs ongoing excavations at Gunston Hall where he serves as the plantation's archaeologist.

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