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Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Archaeology
Studies of the Old Waterfront



Alexandria and Belhaven A Case of Dual Identity

By Diane Riker
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We returned down the river about 16 miles to Alexandria or Belhaven, a small trading place in one of the finest situations imaginable. Archdeacon Burnaby, October 1759¹

For the first dozen years of its history, Alexandria, Virginia, was a town with two names. The majority of those who lived, worked and visited here on the crescent bay by the Potomac knew it as Alexandria, while some of its most prominent citizens called it Belhaven. Others, including mapmakers and the visiting archdeacon quoted above, accepted the difference and used both names.

More than a century after the initial sales of Alexandria lots took place in mid-July 1749, the first comprehensive history of the town was written. Its author, William F. Carne, claimed that Belhaven had predated Alexandria by at least a decade. In his series of articles published in the *Alexandria Gazette* in the 1870s and 1880s,² Carne described a bustling little community of merchants and their families residing at the river end of Oronoco Street as early as the 1730s. In an otherwise estimable work, it was a questionable theory. But it proved contagious. Numerous historians have adopted this view.

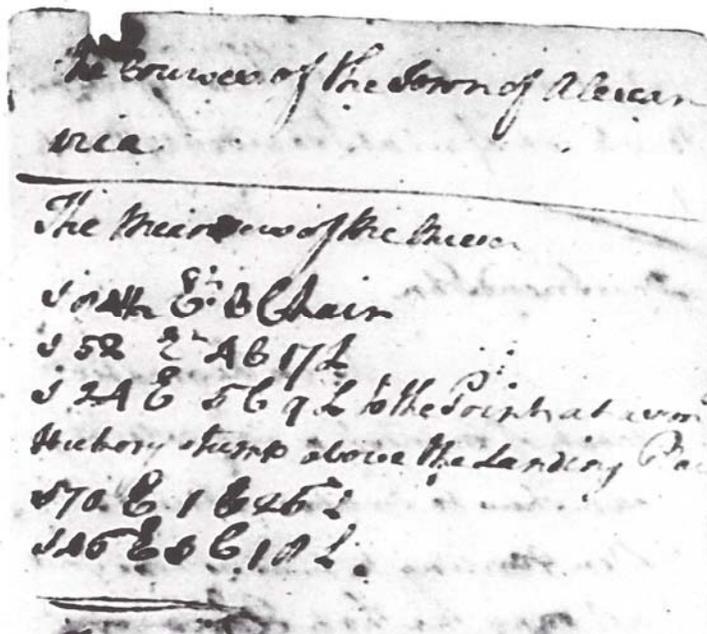
Which came first: Alexandria or Belhaven? This paper will attempt to disentangle fact from fantasy.

Earliest References to Alexandria

Among the George Washington papers in the Library of Congress is a half page of smudgy and hurried script, the output perhaps of someone taking notes out of doors. The page is found in Washington's journal for 1747-48. It is not included among his papers in the authoritative multivolume edition published by the University of Virginia, but it helps to clear up Alexandria's identity issues.

The material in question appears before the notes the 16-year-old Washington wrote as he rode west on March 11, 1748, to survey the properties of Lord Thomas Fairfax with Fairfax's nephew George. However, the journal pages do not seem to be assembled in chronological order. All we can assume is that sometime in 1748 Washington walked the riverbank and the fields at the future site of Alexandria, taking its measure with compass and surveyor's chains.

Here, side by side, are Washington's notes and this writer's rendering of them:



The Courses of the Town of Alexandria

The Meanders of the River

S 84 1/2 E 3 Chain

S 52 E 4 C 17 L

S 24 E 5 C 9 L to the Point at sm

Hickory stump above the Landing Place

S 70 E 1 C 46 L

S 45 E 3 C 18 L³

Library of Congress

This is the earliest reference we have to Alexandria. It would appear to be measurements taken by the young surveyor for a plat of a much-desired port town.

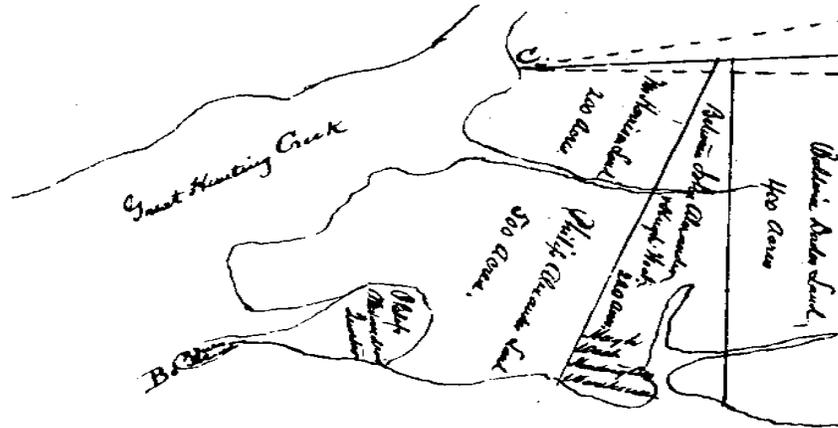
Court depositions, maps, and reminiscences from the area's residents in the early 1700s portrayed an area of field and pasture, bordered by woods and swamp, with two or three tenant farmers, including John Summers and Gabriel Adam, in log houses.⁴

In 1732 the House of Burgesses determined to establish a public warehouse for the storage and inspection of the region's principal crop, tobacco. A warehouse, built for Simon Pearson, already stood on the bluff at the northern point of what would become Alexandria. And its superior location on deep water won out over a planned depot at Great Hunting Creek. The name Hunting Creek, however, went northeast with the permit.

At this time, the land on which Alexandria would stand began to turn from farming to trade. The property was sold by Pearson to Hugh West sometime between 1735 and 1739.⁵ By 1740, West

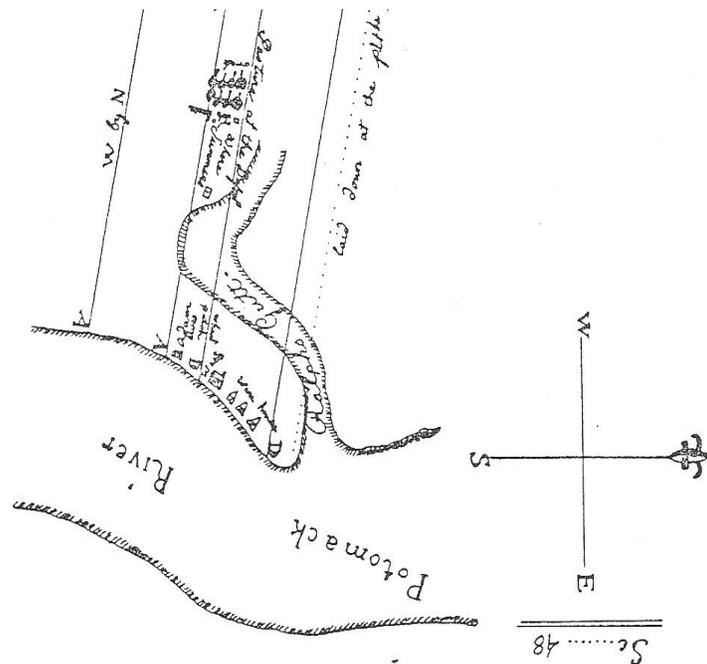
had a ferry to the Maryland side of the Potomac as well as his warehouse.⁶ In 1745, he was also operating an ordinary (tavern).⁷

A survey made by Joseph Berry in 1741 showed “Hugh West Hunting Creek Warehouse” and, near what is now Jones Point, the “quarters” of property-holder Philip Alexander.



Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections
Survey made by Joseph Berry 1st and 2nd weeks of April 1741.

Three years later, Daniel Jennings’ survey for John Alexander v. Hugh West, Sept. 20, 1744, noted both these men, as well as John Summers’ two tobacco houses and an orchard near present-day Queen and Pitt streets and Gabriel Adam, a West tenant.⁸



Beth Mitchell. "Beginning at a White Oak," p. 308. (Redrawn by Susie Beatty)

Part of Jenings' 1744 survey, showing West's warehouses and Adam's house, as well as Summers' improvements. Summers himself had moved farther west "into the forest."⁹

By the time Washington made his plat in 1748 (see below), Adam had moved and Philip Alexander had taken up residence to the south in Stafford County.

A search of the records of Prince William County and Fairfax County (the latter was formed from the northern portion of the former in 1742) has not uncovered a single reference to the Belhaven settlement. The hard-driving merchants who were said by some historians to live there – John Carlyle, John Pagan, and William Ramsay – occupied properties more than a mile to the southwest in the village of Cameron, near present-day Telegraph Road, at the "head of the creek" on Great Hunting Creek. Carlyle's letters to his brother George in England in the 1740s gave his home address as Hunting Creek, not Hunting Creek Warehouse.¹⁰ This would seem to qualify Cameron rather than "Belhaven," as an early center of commerce.

The assets of that town were touted by John Pagan in 1751: "...a Place commonly known by the Name of Cameron, within two Miles of Potowmack River, convenient to two Landings upon the Creek, in the Center of four very public Roads, leading up and down the County, and exceedingly well situated for Trade."¹¹

Why would merchants settle in such a fine location support a new town upriver from their own settlement? The commerce now flowing from the backlands to Hugh West's inspection station would have attracted them, and the fine anchorage there, the last one on the Potomac suitable for

deep-draft vessels before reaching Georgetown, certainly would have. Hunting Creek itself, more fluvial than tidal, did not offer such an anchorage.

In 1748, Washington's half brothers, Augustine and Lawrence, and a half-dozen other local gentlemen and merchants decided to make Ware House Point the northern linchpin of a new port. What matter if the land was exhausted from the demanding tobacco culture; its new destiny would be to serve as a center for trade and commerce.

On October 27, 1748, the journal of the House of Burgesses at Williamsburg recorded the receipt of petitions from Frederick and Fairfax counties "praying that a town may be established at Hunting Creek warehouse on the Potowmack River."¹² Ramsay, Carlyle, Pagan, and Hugh West had secured the significant support of Lord Thomas Fairfax, Washington's mentor.

Perhaps Washington's 1748 plat of Alexandria, which listed numerous "selling points" for the site, was created to help convince the burgesses.¹³



Library of Congress

Washington's 1748 plat, for which he may well have made the notes in his journal. On the reverse is written "The land whereon stands the town of Alexandria," but this would have been added at a later date.

Along the "rolling road" leading from the backlands to the river, Washington drew three distinct structures as well as two conjoined buildings and a shed. He labeled them "Mr. Hugh West's

H^o & Ware^{hos}” just above “Ware^{ho} Point.” Although this was the area where Carne placed the village of Belhaven, these were the only structures shown on Washington’s map.

It took more than six months to receive approval. After three readings and with amendments suggested by the legislature’s second chamber, the Council, the General Assembly passed the proposition and Governor William Gooch signed it on May 11, 1749. Although we have lost the original petition, we may assume that it, or the bill as amended by the Assembly, included the name Alexandria, since the town is so named in the Act of the General Assembly:

*Whereas it has been represented to this present Assembly that a town at the Hunting Creek Warehouse on Potomack River would be Commodious for Trade and Navigation and tend greatly to the Ease and Advantage of the Frontier Inhabitants, Be it therefore Enacted by the Governor, Council and Burgesses of this present General Assembly and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same that within four months after the passing of this Act Sixty acres of Land, a parcel of the Lands of Philip Alexander John Alexander and Hugh West situate lying and being on the South side of Potomack River above the Mouth of Great Hunting Creek and in the County of Fairfax shall be surveied and laid out by the Surveyor of the said County beginning at the Mouth of the first Branch above the Warehouse and extend down the Meanders of the said River Potomack...and the said Sixty acres...is hereby vested in the Right honorable Thomas Lord Fairfax, the honorable William Fairfax Esquire George Fairfax Richard Osborne Lawrence Washington William Ramsey John Carlyle John Pagan Gerrard Alexander and Hugh West of the said County of Fairfax gentlemen and Philip Alexander of the County of Stafford gentleman...and are hereby constituted and appointed Directors and Trustees for designing building carrying on and maintaining the said Town and any six of them shall have power to meet as often as they think necessary and shall lay out the said Sixty Acres into Lots and Streets...**and** be it further Enacted by the Authority aforesaid that the said Town shall be called by the name Alexandria....¹⁴*

Nowhere does the Act note that this was to “expand and supercede the hamlet of Belhaven.” That statement is found in Alexander J. Wedderburn’s souvenir program for Alexandria’s Sesqui-Centennial in 1899. More recently it was used in a Fairfax County education guide for teachers.¹⁵ Both are misleading in that they appear to quote the original legislation and, as we have seen, they do not.

When the advertisement of the first sale of the town lots went into the colonial gazettes, the site of the sale was given as Hunting Creek Warehouse, not Belhaven.

Fairfax County, Virginia, May 27, 1749.

AGREABLE to an Act of Assembly, for Erecting a Town at *Hunting-Creek Warehouse*, upon *Potomack River*, by the Name of ALEXANDRIA; Notice is hereby given, that the Lots in said Town will be exposed to Public Sale, to the highest Bidders, on Thursday the 13th of July next, by
THE TRUSTEES.

Maryland Gazette, June 14, 1749, p. 2.

Why Alexandria?

The land on which the new town was to stand was owned by Philip Alexander, John Alexander and Hugh West. Philip, who owned the lion's share (his share was to yield almost two thirds of the original lots), resisted auctioning his property¹⁶ and had, in fact, petitioned the burgesses in 1748 to locate the new town at Great Hunting Creek.¹⁷ On April 5, 1749, the burgesses had denied that appeal: "that the Petition of Philip Alexander, of the county of Stafford, in Opposition to the Propositions for a Town at Hunting Creek Warehouse and for erecting a Town at the Head of Great Hunting Creek, on the Land of John Minor, in the County of Fairfax, be rejected."¹⁸

In order to coax Alexander to part with his land, Lawrence Washington, John Carlyle, William Ramsay, Nathaniel Chapman and John Dalton formed a group calling themselves "Chapman & Co." The group's strategy was later revealed in the Minutes of the Board of Trustees¹⁹ and in a July 19, 1749, letter from Augustine Washington to his brother Lawrence, who was in London at the time of the auction.²⁰ They had agreed to a private sale beforehand. They would purchase the property at a price satisfactory to Alexander (200 pistoles) and divide any later profit or loss among themselves.

"You will see by the amount of the Sale that your part cleared three hundred & eighty three pistols," Augustine informed his brother. "Everyone seem'd to encourage the things upon your and Mr. Chapman's account, as they were sensible what you did was through a Publick Spirit...You two, Mr. Carlyles, Mr. Dorton (Dalton) Mr. Ramseys, Mr. Chapmans sold at different prices, as you may see by the Sale, but we agreed before the Sale to give any Price for them & to strike them upon an average so that by adding them up and dividing them by five you will see what your two lots Cost. Mr. Chapman was obliged to pay Philip Alexander the money for your and his bond last Stafford Court (before the Sale) or other wise to have George the Second upon his back. Mr. Chapman took into Partnership Mr. Ramsey, Carlyle & Dorton (*Dalton*), Ramsey has a fourth, Dorton and Carlyle the other fourth..."

To sweeten the pot, the conspirators may have agreed early on to name the town after the Alexanders. That the name was a source of pride to that family can be inferred from an indenture John Alexander had recorded Oct. 18, 1763 in Fairfax County giving his son Charles

the land between Baldwin Dade Sr.'s and John Alexander's properties adjoining the new port, "which last land goes by the name of my town."²¹ He may have intended to say "the town of my name."

However, to some of the founders, the agreement to name the town must have seemed very informal because, as we shall see, they were soon ready to abandon it.

Earliest References to Belhaven

It is ironic that our source for the first mention of Belhaven is the same as that for Alexandria - George Washington. In 1749, following the burgesses' approval in May, John West, Jr., as assistant to Fairfax County surveyor Daniel Jennings, surveyed the new town.



Fairfax County Circuit Court²²

This survey, drawn by Hugh West's son John, labeled the land at the foot of Oronoco Street "West Point," a name it retained.

When Washington sent his half brother Lawrence a copy of West's survey with a list of the auction purchasers, however, he changed its title from "A Plan of Alexandria Town" to "A Plan of Alexandria now Belhaven."²³



Library of Congress

Washington's plat made just after the auction of the town lots on July 13 and 14, 1749.

This survey was sent by George Washington to his brother Lawrence in England sometime between July 14, the second and final day of the sale, and Augustine's July 19 letter to Lawrence, which noted that "I had a Plan and a Copy of the Sale of the Lots to send you but as my broth^r has sent both...I need not trouble you with any more." If George sent a cover letter, it has been lost.

The title is particularly significant since Washington had otherwise slavishly copied West's survey, even to the point of trying to reproduce a bit of West's numeral style, e.g., the curled 9s in the leftmost corner. Washington's own nines have straight backs. (This was pointed out in a talk by James D. Bish, March 25, 2009, at the Alexandria Lyceum.)

Were there then second thoughts about the town's name even as auction crier John West, standing at the intersection of the future Cameron and Lee streets, called for bids on those mornings in mid-July 1749?

If Washington's title for his copy of the town map is read literally, there were such thoughts. We know from his 1748 survey notes that Alexandria had been selected as the town's name. The General Assembly had sanctioned that choice. West's survey was of "Alexandria town." And in 1749 Washington did not write "Belhaven, now Alexandria" but just the opposite.

Although I have found no documentation supporting the use of "Belhaven" before 1749, there is abundant evidence of it after the town's founding and extending even to the Revolutionary War. In fact, Augustine Washington's account to Lawrence of the transactions with Philip Alexander, cited above, starts with "As to Belhaven or Alexandria..."

Why Belhaven?

John Hamilton (1656-1708), the second Baron Belhaven, was a revered Scottish hero. He had been among those who in 1689 secured the throne for William and Mary, but he opposed the union of the English and Scottish parliaments. His passionate speech on that subject was taught in every Scottish classroom. Belhaven's son John, on his way to assume the governorship of Barbados in 1721, had been lost at sea, which added a New World connection and poignancy to the family name.



National Portrait Gallery, London
John Hamilton, 2nd Baron Belhaven

The Scottish connection to Alexandria was – and still is – striking. Several of the founders, who settled first at Cameron and then at Alexandria, were Scottish. William Ramsay, who built Alexandria's first house and became the town's most honored citizen, was born in Galloway, Scotland, and came to Prince William County about 1742 to represent a Scottish firm. John Carlyle's parents had settled on the English border and apprenticed their son to an English merchant, but family ties to Scotland were strong.

Carlyle moved into his grand stone house on Fairfax and Cameron streets in 1752. When a few years later he built his country house on Four-Mile Run, he named it “Torthorwald,” after the Carlyle family estate in Dumfries County, Scotland. John Pagan, a merchant from Glasgow, had preceded Carlyle to Cameron and soon became his trusted colleague. John Dalton, who had the distinction of buying the first lot in Alexandria, was born in this country but is believed to have been of Scottish extraction.²⁴

Perhaps, having secured Alexander’s property, these loyal Scotsmen no longer felt obligated to him.

And, of course, Belhaven was a fine name for a port.

Alexandria (alias Belhaven)

Ramsay kept his accounts in books (printed by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia) with the heading on each page: “Mr. William Ramsey of Belhaven in Potomack river.”²⁵ When Pagan sold a landing and warehouses in October 1751, he described them as “20 miles from Belhaven.”²⁶ Dalton had the then common experience of having a shipment go to the wrong port. When his “trunk, box and bundle of bedclothes” arrived at Baltimore in 1767, it was discovered as being addressed to a “Mr. Dalton in Belhaven.”²⁷

It seems that some, in defiance of the Act, stubbornly called their town Belhaven.

An advertisement appeared on Jan. 20, 1751, in the *Virginia Gazette* for a lottery to finance a church and a market-house “at Belhaven, in Fairfax County.”²⁸ The lottery was to be “under the Care and Management of Col. George William Fairfax, Major Lawrence Washington, Col. William Fitzhugh, Mr. George Mason, Mr. William Ramsay, Mr. John Carlyle, Mr. John Dalton, Mr. John Pagan, Mr. Gerard Alexander, Mr. Nathaniel Chapman and Major Augustine Washington.”

Despite its illustrious managers, the proposed lottery met with “Surmises and base Insinuations of some ill disposed Persons” and had to be postponed in May and finally called off in February 1752.²⁹ The significance of these ads is their witness to the fact that, in the minds of its leading citizens, Belhaven was now the official name of their community.

When Josiah Fry and Peter Jefferson, father of the president, drew their map of Virginia and Maryland from new surveys in 1751,³⁰ they gave the port a dual identity.

In August 1753, William Waite advertised for the return of three runaways: a bricklayer with “a very ill aspect” and new shoes, his wife with round shoulders and two front teeth missing, and their companion, “one of few Words except when in Liquor.” They were to be returned to Belhaven.³⁵

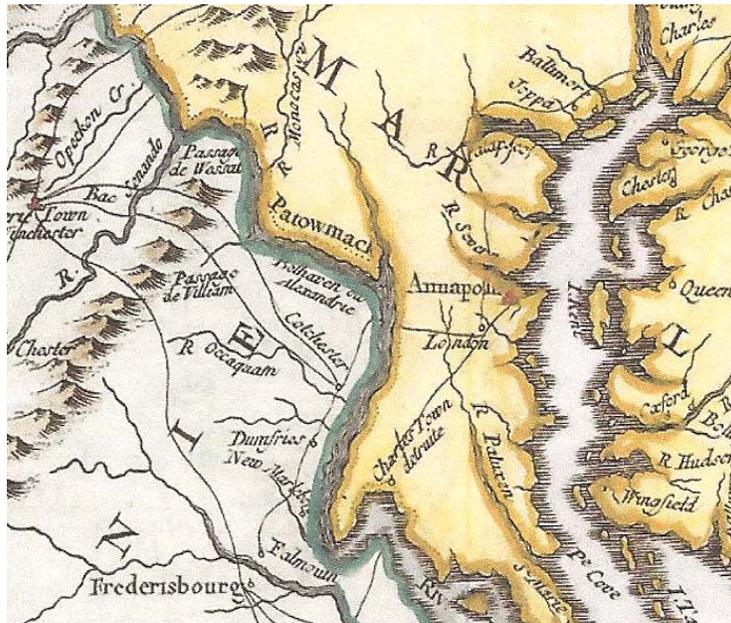
At the end of 1753, Carlyle and Dalton were selling the hull of the brigantine *Success* “at the home of Joseph Chew, in Alexandria (alias Belhaven).”³⁶ In July 1754, John Fitzhugh, of Stafford County, had for sale “One Thousand Acres of Land, 20 miles from *Belhaven*, with a rich Copper Mine upon it.”³⁷

During the years of the Ohio campaigns, or French and Indian War, Col. George Washington sometimes called the town Belhaven. Annoyed by the reluctance of the Colony to grant him what he considered an appropriate salary, he wrote to Gov. Robert Dinwiddie on May 29, 1754: “When you were so kind to prefer me to the Comn. I now have, and at the same time acquainted me that I was to have but 12/6 – This with some other Reasons induced me to acquaint Colo. Fairfax with my intention of Resigning, which he must well remember as it happ’d at Belhaven; and was there that he dissuaded me from it...”³⁸ Another letter to the governor on Oct. 1, 1755, is puzzling. Although it refers to Alexandria in its autographed original, Washington’s letter-book copy uses Belhaven.

Governor Dinwiddie’s official records contain references to Belhaven, including this criticism of the soldiers’ behavior: “The Soldiers while in Belhaven, were guilty of many Irregularities in pulling down the Wainscot of the Ho., and leav’g them in a very dirty Condit’n.”³⁹

Sometimes the town left foreigners of two minds about its name (and its age).

The war brought British redcoats and occasionally their kin here. A Mrs. Browne, who had accompanied her brother, a commissary officer with General Braddock’s forces, wrote in her diary Mar. 22, 1755: “Went to Shore to Bellhaven ...as agreeable a Place as could be expected, it being inhabited but 4 years.” At the same time, the servant of a British officer reported in his journal: “We left Hampton and Sailed up the Potwomack River to Alexandria. As soon as all the ships Ariv’d, the town (Alexandria) Being very small, only Built five years, Obliged us to go to Camp.”⁴⁰



Collection of J. H. Hardaway, Alexandria

“Belhaven ou Alexandria” is at the center of this section of French cartographer Jacques Nicolas Bellin’s *Carte de la Virginie, de la Baye Chesapeack et Pays Voisin*, ca. 1755.

After the 1750s, “Belhaven” was cited far less frequently, though it was not completely discarded. William Ramsay continued to use his Belhaven account books well into the 1760s and, as we have seen, John Dalton’s baggage was marked Belhaven when it went astray in 1767.

In 1783, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, claiming his pension, said that he had enlisted at Belhaven.⁴¹ That same year, a French mapmaker published in Paris a map of Virginia and Maryland for a “portable modern atlas” and marked the place as “Alexandria and Belhaven.”⁴²

As the founders died off (Dalton in 1777, Carlyle in 1780, Ramsay in 1785), so too did the name, only to be reborn in a popular Victorian novel and on the pages of history books. In 1892, Constance Cary Harrison, granddaughter of Thomas, the ninth Lord Fairfax, and related also to John Carlyle, published what has been called “the first post-war Southern novel.” It is a collection of stories set in antebellum Alexandria and titled “Belhaven Tales.”⁴³ Mrs. Burton Harrison (she used her married name for her novels) based the *Tales* on her own girlhood experiences at her grandfather’s estate, Vacluse, at today’s Seminary Hill.

There is no question that Belhaven was an important part of Alexandria’s history, but it appears equally certain that it was not so until 1749, and that its tenuous hold on Alexandrians had faded by the Revolutionary War, to be reborn a century later from the pen of a journalist, William Carne, and in the stories recalled and invented by a Fairfax and Carlyle descendant.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 Miller, T. Michael, ed. *Alexandria's Forgotten Legacy: The Annals of William F. Carne*. Alexandria, Va: Alexandria Library, Local History and Special Collections, 1983.
- 3 Washington, D.C. Library of Congress. This page of the 1747/48 diary can be viewed online as image 21 at <http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mgw/mgw1b/481/02100.jpg>. The colonial surveyors used chains (C) and their links (L) to measure. A chain equaled 33 feet; a link was 7.92 inches.
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- 6 Munson, James D. Col.. John Carlyle, Gent.: A True and Just Account of the Man and His House, Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, 1986, page 31.
- 7 Mackay, James Cobham III. *The Development of Taverns in Alexandria, Virginia 1750-1810*. Fairfax, Va. Master's thesis, George Mason University, 1995, p. 9.
- 8 Maps division, Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections.
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- 10 Carlyle Papers. Alexandria, Va.: Carlyle House Museum collection.
- 11 *Maryland Gazette*, May 8, 1751.
- 12 The petition's progress through the General Assembly can be traced in Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia. Richmond, Va. 1919, vol. 7, pp. 265, 355-6, 360, 363, 368, 375, 385-6, 405.
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- 17 Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia. Richmond, Va. 1919, vol. 7, pp. 265
- 18 *Ibid*. p. 355.

ENDNOTES

- 19 The transaction is supported in *Proceedings of the Board of Trustees of the Town of Alexandria, Virginia* Feb. 10, 1761, in *United States v. Bryant*, Northern Virginia Conservation Council, Exhibit C, pp. 40 and 43. Alexandria Library – Local History/Special Collections. The pistole was a Spanish coin accepted for a time as colonial currency.
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- 22 *Fairfax County Record of Surveys 1742-1856*, p. 56.
- 23 Washington, George. *Alexandria now Belhaven*. Washington, D.C. Library of Congress, Maps Division.
- 24 www.alexandriava.gov/city/timeline/alex_timeline_1700.html
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- 26 *Virginia Gazette*, Oct. 11, 1751.
- 27 *Maryland Gazette*, Aug. 3, 1767.
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- 31 *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia*. Richmond, Va., 191 vol. 8, page 34.
- 32 *Maryland Gazette*, Nov. 2, 1752.
- 33 *Ibid.* Nov. 9, 1752.
- 34 *Virginia Gazette*, Nov. 3, 1752. James C. Mackay, *op. cit.*
- 35 *Maryland Gazette*, Aug. 29, 1753.
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