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Studies of the Old Waterfront



Really Big Real Estate Deal

By Ted Pulliam
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It was probably the biggest real estate deal in the history of Northern Virginia.

The seller was Robert Howson, and his property was all the land on which Arlington Cemetery, the Pentagon, Reagan National Airport, and Old Town Alexandria are now located. Moreover, Howson sold the property within a month after he obtained it.

This was not a recent sale, as you probably guessed. In fact, it took place in 1669. In a sense, Howson was Northern Virginia's first real estate broker, and he set the standard for those to follow by turning over a vast quantity of property quickly for a neat profit

Howson obtained the land by a grant from the Royal Governor of Virginia, on October 21, 1669. The grant was for 6,000 acres of wilderness inhabited only by small groups of Indians who came just for the fishing season.

Howson was thought to be the first European to own the property, and he received it for transporting 120 people to the colony. On November 13, 1669, he sold all of it to John Alexander, whose family gave Alexandria its name, for "Six thousand pounds of Tobacco and cask."

For more than 75 years it was thought that Howson was a sea captain -- probably because it was a quick sale and a sea captain might speedily trade non-shipable land for easily shipable tobacco. Recently, however, it was noted that his sales agreement with Alexander referred to Howson as "Robert Howson . . . , Gent.," the "Gent." being an abbreviation for "Gentleman."

In 17th-century England "Gentleman" was taken seriously and denoted rank between the nobility (duke, earl, etc.) and the yeoman (small farmer). It generally meant the person owned landed estates, likely was entitled to display a coat of arms, and did no work with his hands. In Virginia the term was used more loosely, but was it used so loosely that it could apply to a rough, itinerant sea captain?

Recent research has found that in fact Howson was not a sea captain but a real gentleman of the times, a tobacco merchant, justice of the peace from Stafford County, and neighbor of John Alexander.

But John Alexander's heirs were in for a surprise after they inherited all the property a few years later. Part of it, the part that was to become the heart of Old Town, actually was owned by another gentleman. And that "gentleman" turned out to be a lady.

She was Mistress Margaret Brent. When she had been granted the land in 1654, 15 years before the Howson grant, she had just moved to Virginia from Maryland. In Maryland she had been a close associate of the Governor Leonard Calvert (gossip said she had been the Governor's *intimate* associate) and had appeared often in the local courts handling business matters. Those court appearances were then so rare for a woman that in some court records she was listed as "Mistress Margaret Brent, Gentleman."

By the time the overlapping grants were discovered, in 1675, Mistress Brent had died. Her heirs, however, inherited her disputatious disposition as well as the land and forced the Alexander heirs to purchase the property again. Moreover, while John Alexander had paid Howson only one pound of tobacco an acre for the property, his heirs had to pay the Brent heirs 15 pounds an acre.

Like other landowners since, Robert Howson probably wished he had held on to his property a little while longer. Then he could have made a really big sale.