

# Letters That Bring Back the Past

## Recently Discovered Day-Books, Ledgers and Correspondence of a Firm Operating Immediately After the Revolutionary War and Before the Ratification of the Constitution Reveal Past Glory of Dumfries, Va., as Former Thriving Trading Center—Most Famous Families in Virginia Linked With Village Now Crumbling to Decay—"Old Store" One of Country's Oldest Structures.

By BESSIE WILMARTH GAHN

Photos by the Author.

THE mystery of old Dumfries, Va., has been solved at last! Old store-books and the business correspondence of Messrs. Hule, Reid & Co., merchants of Dumfries, recently brought to light, revive the life of this once prosperous, important town on the Potomac. Long-hidden secrets regarding the very beginning of our foreign and domestic commerce, and business conditions, agricultural and financial, in war-torn Europe following America's war for independence are disclosed.

The identities of a number of the first real-estate speculators in land to be used later for a National Capital on the Potomac are brought to light in the letters, and intimate, unrecorded incidents are given in the lives and customs of many old families of Tidewater Virginia whose descendants live in Washington today.

It has been found that an old, weatherbeaten frame house on the side of the road where the State highway from Washington to Richmond passes through Dumfries is none other than the building used 140 years ago as a trading center house by this once prosperous firm of Scotch merchants. In fact, the villagers at Dumfries for many generations have referred to the place as "the Old Store," and present inhabitants of the old county seat will affirm that it is probably the "oldest house in Virginia."

There is a side yard, nearly hidden by tall, ancient lilacs, and a deep, shady porch down the side of the house, where Mrs. Tubbs, a gentle, blue-eyed little widow of 82 years, raises flowers in various sized boxes and pots. For nearly 50 years, she has lived in this house with her brother, Mr. Foote, who is but three years younger than she. In the front of the building, where ancient, worn steps lead straight up from the roadway, there is a shoemaking shop, with old, worn counters, latch-locked doors, and stalwart beams that apparently once served as part of some ancient ship. This is where Mr. Foote has "built up" and "made over" old shoes for the villagers ever since he arrived in Dumfries, and nothing about the store has been changed. In fact, so quietly and peacefully have these old folks lived through the years that yesterday's memories linger undisturbed in every nook and cranny.

Across the highway and directly opposite the old store is another weather-worn building. This is now closed and sandy marked "For Sale." In its prosperous days, this was the "Farmers Hotel." It was owned and managed until recently by Mr. George Ratcliffe, with the aid of his daughter, Mrs. Spence. Last year (1929) Mr. Ratcliffe died, after living 84 years in Dumfries. He was buried in the cemetery of the old Episcopal Church, on the hill just back of the village.

Many years ago, when Mr. Foote arrived in Dumfries and opened his shoemaking business in the front room of the old store, Mr. Ratcliffe, just across the road, opened a general store to which he attached a bar, or "tap room," in the front room of his "Farmers' Hotel." By virtue of his long and continued residence, Mr. Ratcliffe had become "historian" of Dumfries.

In 1822, when George Ratcliffe's father was yet a young man, the county court was removed from Dumfries to Brentsville. But long after court assemblies had ceased in Dumfries, the "courthouse corner" of the village was kept alive. There were weekly gatherings at the Old Store and the "Farmers' Hotel" for local gossip and news, and memories of old times in Dumfries were renewed, now and then, with the aid of Mr. George Ratcliffe.

This historian would tell you, in whispers, perhaps, that at one time, when he was a boy, Dumfries was considered a "very good place to keep away from!" Its once busy streets, crowded wharves, fine stores, were gone; its social life had disappeared, and most of the pioneer families had died, or moved elsewhere even before the Civil War. After this exodus, the fine old homes fell into a dilapidated condition, and the place became a refuge for

"tramps, thieves, and other bad characters from the river." There was drinking, carousing and robbery, and woe to the unfortunate traveler whose journey carried him along the highway through Dumfries!

The old stage coach with its bags of mail, which once made trips through the village to carry all news between the North and the South, had given way in 1816 to a line of steamboats which plied from Washington and Alexandria to Aquia, where connections were made with Fredericksburg, and in 1834 with the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad, which ran all the way to Richmond.

Mr. Ratcliffe recalled the days when furnace-heating systems were first used in the houses of Alexandria and Washington; and he spoke of his own efforts to improve his Farmers' Hotel by digging under it a space deep enough for a furnace. To his amazement, he said, he discovered an old dungeon, and in it there was seated a perfect, human skeleton!

But the historian's great "mystery story" was in regard to the Old Store across the road. "I'd give anything to know," he would begin, "about some old papers that were once stored in that old place across the road. They would be valuable, if we had them today."

The papers were found many years ago, long before Mrs. Tubbs and Mr. Foote came to live in Dumfries, even before the Civil War. At that time, Old Mammy Gray kept house in the back rooms of the Old Store, while her husband attended to the shop. Mammy's particular friend was old Mrs. Brawner, who lived just a piece up the road. Together they were making a fine rag carpet, one day, when all of their material ran out. Let's go up into the garret," suggested Mammy Gray. "I know there's a pile of

old rags up there, and we can just take all we want for the carpet."

"Now, the way to the garret, in those days, was up a ladder that reached through a square trap door in the ceiling, the only opening to the place. So, once in the garret, the old ladies firmly placed their candlestick and carefully looked about. In the darkness, Mammy Gray's shoe knocked over some object of metal. By the light of her candle, she discovered a rust-covered, very old lantern.



Quaint old lantern found in the garret of the "Old Store" at the same time the old letters were discovered.

stooping to pick it up, her hand touched and moved the lid of a dusty, secret chest. She pushed back the lid and to her amazement found that the chest was filled with old, worn ledgers and packages of letters elaborately covered with quill-pen scrolls and richly yellowed with age.

"Mammy Gray carefully lifted out some of the letters, and together with Mrs. Brawner, who knew how to read, found that they were the long hidden papers of an old tobacco firm, Messrs. Hule, Reid & Co., merchants, in Dumfries, Va. The earliest of the papers were dated in 1784; the rest bore dates extending to 1795 or 1796.

"Under the dust and mold, there appeared its original handwriting the signatures of members of such families as the Carters, Masons, Washingtons, Walkers, Lees, Burwells, Hunters, Blands, Bullitts, Birds, Brents, Popes, Hooes, Alexanders, Chapmans, Tylers and so on. Many of the letters were from the firm of Smith, Hule, Alexander & Co., Fort Glasgow, Scotland. Others were from commercial agents in London, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and from Havre de Grace, France; or from Philadelphia, Hildensburgh, Fredericksburg, Alexandria, or George Town, Montgomery Co.

"Naturally, the old ladies were excited, but they were also very discreet. Carefully they placed the papers back in the chest, took up the rags for their carpet, blew out the candle, and cautiously descended the ladder. They told no one about the letters, for a while; but old Mrs. Brawner later sent out a letter and no one knew what it was about."

Thus the letters were discovered and with them came to light long-hidden secrets of the very beginning of our foreign and domestic commerce in the days before the ratification of the Constitution.

A king and a queen were on the throne, in France, and Austria was at war with Holland. King George the Third was making bold attempts to protect the commerce of the Isles of Great Britain. And here in our own first "Thirteen States," patriots were nursing their wounds and scars, and planting new crops of tobacco, the one common currency in America, when the first of the letters to Hule, Reid & Co. were delivered in Dumfries, Va.

THE Village of Dumfries is in a protected valley on the north side of Quantico Creek, not far from the Potomac River. Its present handful of houses, most of them frame, have sprung up along the sides of the highway. Heavy trucks, public buses, touring cars, passing between Washington and Richmond, whiz through the village at a dangerous speed, and so quickly are they beyond and over the next hill that Dumfries is passed almost as soon as it is reached. Thus, no one observes the crumbled foundations that mark each side of the road.

In the side yard of the Old Store, for instance, where myrtle vines thickly carpet a space between the lilacs, the county courthouse once stood, and George Washington was not yet in the prime of life when he first attended court in this place. Mr. Foote will tell you that the courthouse foundations were there until a short while ago, when he dug up the space for his garden, and that the narrow dirt road just beyond the lilac hedge was once the "old rolling road that led clean over to the mountains."

And the crumbled foundations just beyond the Old Store, along the highway! Armed with information supplied in the collection of old store books and letters of Hule, Reid & Co., and inspired by George Ratcliffe's stories, it is fascinating to look over the remainder of Dumfries and attempt to surmise what the ruins may have meant, 150 years or so ago.

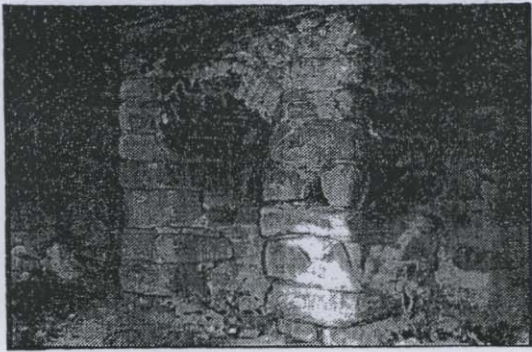
Perhaps we are now standing where the old opera house stood, where Gen. Washington viewed the production, in 1771, of "The Recruiting Officer," after dutifully attending sessions at (Dumfries) court. Perhaps the old Jockey Club belonging to Col. Richard Blackburn was here. Col. Blackburn was one of the town's first trustees, in 1749, and his home was at old Hippon Lodge, nearby.

Somewhere in the town there was a poor house, and there was a committee to care for the poor, whose president was none other than Col. Thomas Lee, of Park Gate, near Dumfries. This member of the extensive Lee family was a son of Richard Henry Lee and a grandson of old Thomas Lee, of Stratford. Records state that he married twice; first, to Mildred Washington, daughter of John Augustine Washington, and secondly to Eliza Ashton Brent.

The Brents, you remember, lived near Aquia, in Stafford County and just across the line from Prince William. From old Richard was the home of Robert Brent, sr., and his wife, Ann Carroll, came the illustrious Robert Brent, jr., first Mayor of Washington City, and Mr. D. C. Brent, Robert's brother, named for his wealthy grandfather, Daniel Carroll, of Duddington, Md.

One of the letters in the collection of Hule, Reid & Co. is written in the clear, forceful writing of one Thomas Lee, sr., who states that he is writing at the request of Mr. D. C. Brent, who wishes him to order certain articles of white silk and white satin for Miss Polly Brent, "by whom they will be shortly wanted." Surely the daily newspaper of Dumfries would publish an account of the affair for which Miss Polly Brent wanted them, for whenever she came with her friends in their chariots and "chairs" to attend public balls and exclusive tea drinkings, the Dumfries newspaper reported it.

Near the upper end of the village today, there is a well preserved building of red brick, cor-



The basement of the Judge Tebbs House at Dumfries, built in 1749, presents a succession of surprises. Note the secret pockets in the side of the stone fireplace.

niced with slabs of white stone. Like other white-stone trimmings on buildings in the vicinity, this stone most probably came from the old quarries of the Brents' at Aquia, the quarries which were leased by the United States Government in later days to provide stone for the Capitol at Washington. This building in Dumfries is old Love's Tavern, where Washington stopped to rest on his trips southward from Mount Vernon, and where Lafayette stayed overnight when he journeyed northward.

Not far from the tavern and about 200 feet west of the highway, there is a dark, pine forest on the hillside. It is a fitting background for the once-pretentious house there before it, yet the house is hidden from its base to its second story by tall, rank weeds and bushes undergrowth. Its artistic doorway of white stone, once the threshold of aristocratic Virginia and distinguished foreign visitors, now is completely lost in mazes of trumpet, wild grape and other reckless vines grown wild. The structure of the house is very similar to that of Love's Tavern, to Gunston Hall, George Mason's home, and to old Pohick Church, George Mason's church, both places on the way to Dumfries from Alexandria. All Dumfries from Alexandria. All of these buildings are of similar design—red brick corncobbed with white stone from Aquia.

The present owner of this house on the hill is Mr. George King, who keeps a store in the village. He calls it "the Betsy Tebbs house." It was built in the early days of the town (1749) by Judge Foushee Tebbs, one of the town's incorporators. Mrs. Betsy Tebbs was the last of that family to own it. For many years after, it was occupied by the Munday family, and after the Civil War it was used as a public school.

At the other end of Dumfries, the highway passes over a wooden bridge, and here is romance indeed! Quantico Creek, now virtually dry, was once a deep, rushing course of water up which vessels were sailed heavily laden with merchandise from far across the Atlantic! Some people have doubted this fact, but the collection of letters from Huie, Reid & Co. has established proof that at one time, at the mouth of the creek, on the Potomac River, white-sailed, ocean-going vessels once drifted with loads of tobacco, wheat, and lumber, bound for the West Indies, Scotland, London, Holland, France, and other far-away places. And these same ships came back, by-and-by, laden with wine, salt, rum, dry goods, and other manufactured articles from Europe, eagerly awaited cargoes that were brought up old Quantico Creek and deposited at the custom house and on the busy wharves for Scotch merchants and traders at Dumfries. Ruins of the old custom house are still in view along the side of the creek.

And the warehouses! There were rows of them, the first having been erected, by order of Great Britain, in 1730. These warehouses remained many years after busy Dumfries was dead. There seems to be no record to establish the fact that they were burned in the great fire which swept through the town about the time of the War of 1812, yet old residents declare that it is true.

The old account books of Huie, Reid & Co. make frequent mention of the ships which they used, and which they very often chartered to others. The list follows: Adventure, Agness, Ann (ship), Betsy (brig), Boyd, Christians Mary, Molly (ship), Polly, William (sloop).

In an entry in one of the day-books for 1737, the "Brig Betsy" is charged with the following:

"Craftage of goods from Betsy up the creek; 2 tons of iron plates, from Bladensburg; 2 hhds. sugar, up the creek; London goods, up the creek."

"Craftage of goods down the creek; 5 casks wine, to Alexandria; 16 hogsheds tobacco, down the creek from the wharf; 16 hogsheds tobacco, to the creek mouth; 25 hogsheds tobacco, down the creek; 35 hogsheds tobacco, to the mouth of the creek."

There is an elaborate bill, dated 1734, for this craftage of goods. It is in the artistic handwriting of Thomas Chapman, who signs it with style, scroll and flourish. An interesting history of this young gentleman may be gleaned from the letters of Huie, Reid & Co.

Within the two years following his craftage of goods "up and down the creek," he becomes a member of the prosperous firm at Dumfries and one of the town's first and foremost citizens. There are numbers of notes written to "Mr. Thomas Chapman" that prove his popularity with the

daughters of prominent planters. Genealogists state that he married Miss Susanna Ewell, daughter of Maj. Bertrand Ewell, of Buck Hall, nearby, one of the founders of Dumfries and a cousin of the Washingtons. One of the grandsons of Thomas Chapman evidently inherited his artistic tastes; he not only conquered the art of making scrolls with a pen, but he tried his luck with a paintbrush, and his fame spread to foreign countries. To the present day, visitors in the Rotunda of the Capitol at Washington, D. C., to look with admiration at the large painting entitled "The Baptism of Pocahontas," by Thomas Gadsby Chapman, whose mother was a daughter of John Gadsby of "hotel fame," and whose father was a son of Thomas Chapman!

Another daughter of Maj. Bertrand Ewell (Frances) married the Rev. Mason Locke Weems, famed for his sermons of Washington and his love for cherry tree anecdotes. Another interesting connection of the Ewell family was that of the daughter of Col. Jesse Ewell, Bertrand's brother, who married Dr. Craik, Washington's friend and physician, and lived at Bel Air, not far from Dumfries.

After Thomas Chapman entered the firm of Huie, Reid & Co., his business on the creek seems to have been continued by one William Tebbs, for on June 9, 1737, the following entry was made in one of the ledgers:

"Paid for craftage of London goods, up the creek, 9 shillings."

"Paid Wm. Tebbs in full of his craftage, 2 pounds."

Still another memorandum: "Merchandise to William Hunter, Alexandria, - - - 1 hhd. Jamaica Rum, 25 pounds, 1 shilling, 6 pence."

And another: "James Reid to Georgetown Store - - - Humes History of England."

Letters found with these old store books indicate that branches of the firm were located at Georgetown and Bladensburg, Md., and across Occoquan Creek, nearby, in old Colchester, another town of the days of long ago. There is an entry in the day-book for 1737, as follows:



Old mill on Quantico Creek, at Dumfries, Va., once turned by flow of the stream, since silted up.

"Balance due George Town Store for Dealings at Colchester, 12 Pounds, 5 Shillings."

IN the very early days of Dumfries, long before Messrs. Huie Reid & Co. came over from Bonny Scotland, the land about Dumfries had been granted to John Graham (1741), who came over from Perthshire, married Christian Brown, of Port Tobacco, Md., and settled on his newly acquired property. In two years, his wife died, and John Graham married the daughter of Catesby Cocks and became county clerk. Then came a series of merchant ships from Scotland, bringing thrifty merchants from the old country who had "salt on their tongue, and brawn in their arms, and clear-sighted business heads." Fortunes were made by linking the commerce of Europe with the trade of inland Virginia, and Dumfries became the mart of the Potomac.

But, was to the business from across the seas when the Revolution flamed up in Virginia! Foreign merchants and foreign ven-

els were prohibited from the Potomac until the spring of 1784; and as soon as the Legislature raised the bar to foreigners, a prosperous firm in Port Glasgow, Scotland (Smith, Huie, Alexander & Co.), sent over a shipload of manufactured wares, together with a couple of Scotchmen, and started branch house in Dumfries under the name "Huie, Reid & Co., Merchants, in Dumfries." (These facts are proved by statements in letters from Holland and France addressed to the firm in Port Glasgow, Scotland.)

Other Scotch houses followed suit, and the streets of Dumfries became alive with business—and the Potomac (named by the Indians "Patowmek," "River of Traders") lived up to its name. By August 7, 1783, the following large mercantile houses were there located:

- James Muschett,
- Hugh Ferguson & Co.
- James James,
- Huie, Reid & Co.
- Peter Trennis,
- David W. Scott,
- John Darwell & Co.
- William Carr,
- William Barnes & Co.
- Richard Scott,
- Lithgow & Lawson,
- Henderson, Ferguson & Gibson,
- Ector Alexander,
- Timothy Brundige,
- Bernard Gallagher,
- James and George Murray & Co.

Along the road south of Dumfries which turns westward from the bridge and follows Quantico Creek, there is an old, cobblestone path that branches off and leads down a few yards to the creek. In former days, this was the ford to the mill, which still looms up on the opposite side of the stream. The mill is an enormous, gray stone affair, its huge wooden wheel idly resting on the dry rocks and sand at its feet, its doorways and windows tightly boarded over, and its roof gaily dotted with patches of bright green moss. In the woods beside it, a stone-lined causeway, long in disuse, connects with a dam built across the creek evidently when the fatal "silt-up" process began to fill the stream and to slow up the big wheel. This was years after commerce up the creek from the Potomac had been ruined through similar cause. The scene at the old mill today reminds one of a once-alert, once-powerful monster, now doomed forever to sleep.

And the fate of the mill was the fate of the town. After all its commercial and social importance, both in foreign lands and with neighboring towns of Virginia and of Maryland, Dumfries itself was doomed. Even before the Revolutionary War, the bed of Quantico Creek had begun to fill up with silt, and the process continued throughout the period of the Revolution, when no thought could be given to domestic affairs by patriotic American citizens. However, after the war, when shipping and trade were resumed in earnest and the waterway to Dumfries become obstructed, the most prominent townsmen met in public sessions and decided, first, to clear the creek. That failing, they met again, in 1795, and organized the "Quantico Company," whose duty it became to raise money by lotteries to build a grand canal, with locks through which merchant vessels might once more come and go. This brought a revival of trade, until the canal itself began to silt up. By this time, most of the oldest citizens were gone, and Alexandria, with her deep-water harbor, her fine roads to and over the mountains, and her proximity to the new Federal City (Washington), had become the center of the new Federal City (Washington).

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ington), gradually absorbed the trade that once belonged to Dumfries.

Northeast of Dumfries, at Free-stone Point, between Neabsco Creek and Powell Creek, Leesylvania looks down on the Potomac. This was the home of the Lee family for six generations. Here Henry Lee took his bride, the beautiful Lucy Grymes, to live, and here their illustrious sons were born and raised.

One of the sons was "Light Horse Harry," father of Gen. Robert E. Lee. Another son was the famed Charles Lee, who at the time of the Old Store in Dumfries was listed in the ledgers as "Charles Lee, Naval Officer," and who later (1796) became Washington's Attorney General; Richard Bland Lee, prominent in locating the Capital at Washington, and other sons who figured in making the history of the United States of America.

Among the ruins at Leesylvania there are traces of an old garden, and two gravestones here mark the last resting place of the master and mistress of this once handsome estate, where a life's happiness had surrounded them.

Somewhere near Dumfries, there was an old estate which is called, in the letters and in old parish records, Park Gate. As previously-mentioned, this was the home of old Thomas Lee, who was born in 1758 and died in 1805. One of his sisters married Daniel Carroll Brent, brother of Robert Brent, first mayor of Washington City. Perhaps the white satin articles ordered, in one of the letters, for Miss Polly Brent, were for his niece, after all! And

Park Gate itself must have been located betwixt Dumfries and Fredericksburg (mentioned in a letter), and possibly very near to Aquia, then the home of the Brents in Virginia.

South of Dumfries, on a hill near the mouth of the creek, Graham Park, the estate of John Graham and his family, majestically stood. A portion of this estate was used when Dumfries itself was laid out, in 1749, when John Graham was one of the trustees. As mentioned previously, John Graham married, first, Christian Brown, daughter of old Dr. Gustavus Brown, of Port Tobacco, across the Potomac in Maryland. In this way, he became a brother-in-law to the Rev. James Scott, pastor of the church at Dumfries, who had married Christian Brown's sister, Sarah. John Graham's second marriage was to the daughter of Catesby Cocke, clerk of the county, who gave up his job to his new son-in-law.

At the mouth of Quantico Creek, on a high bluff overlooking the Potomac, was Viewmont, the estate of Cuthbert Bullitt and his wife, Helen, a daughter of the Rev. James Scott. One of the sons of this Cuthbert Bullitt later moved to Kentucky and attained such fame that a county was given his name. Thomas Chapman (previously named) must have been a frequent visitor at Viewmont, for many of the letters in the old collection, addressed to him by the Misses Bullitt, were written in most intimate vein!

Further back in the county of old Prince William, John Carter lived at Sudley, and ground out flour from his home-grown wheat,

using the mill on his place. Down at Sabine Hall, his dignified father, old Landon Carter, wrote dignified letters to the merchants at Dumfries to whom "my son John" was indebted. This father of John Carter was none other than the son of that Robert who was named by Virginians "King Carter."

There are pages and pages yet to be written of the people and the olden days in Dumfries, Va., and now that these letters have come to light, new and interesting data are made available.