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THE NELSON FAMILY 1010.165-5-21
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Park Historian, Colonial
1967

FORTNER: THE NELSON FAMILY

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Colonial National Historical Park

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THE NELSON FAMILY
(A Synopsis)

In 1705 a young Englishman stood on the beach under the town of York in the colony of Virginia and contemplated his future as he walked up the hill to Main Street. He had made a decision which must have been difficult for him. This young man would no longer sail the oceans of the world; he would instead depart forever from the deep and establish himself a thousand leagues from his homeland in a small town on the banks of the York River and take up his father's business of merchant. Today, you can stand on this same beach and walk up this same hill, gaze about and see the results of the decision and think about your nation and your liberty, for Thomas Nelson became in a few short years the sire of a dynasty which had far reaching effects, not only on the history of Virginia but also, not many years later, on the newly created United States of America.

Thomas Nelson, merchant of Yorktown who was born in 1677, the son of Hugh and Sarah Nelson of Penrith, England, near the Scotch border, made three voyages to Virginia before he settled here and began his rise to a position of wealth and influence in the colony. Within two years Thomas, or "Scotch Tom," as he came to be known, had acquired two lots in York along with a number of slaves and a house which he probably built on one of the two half-acre lots. "Scotch Tom" must have established himself well, for by 1710 he was married to Margaret Reade, daughter of John Reade, a resident of York County. A year later Thomas was sworn in as county court justice, his son William was born that summer, and he was in a position to furnish supplies to the fort which was built at York.

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The years between 1711 and 1723 were fruitful for "Scotch Tom" both in wealth and family. He obtained title to several more lots in York, became co-operator of a ferry, a builder of a tavern known as the Swan, owner of slaves, charter member of a trading company, trustee of York's port land, and a large-scale farmland owner. His daughter, Mary, and son, Thomas, were born in 1713 and 1716, respectively.

The Nelson household was saddened between 1719 and 1723, for "Scotch Tom's" wife died. In February of 1723 Thomas once again was married, this time to Frances Tucker, a widow who bore him one daughter, Sarah, in 1724. Tom's business successes continued. By 1725 he had added over six hundred acres to his holdings and had built his own warehouse and wharf on the beach. In 1728 another mill was added to his growing list of possessions.

Thomas' son William, who had been sent to England in 1722 for schooling, returned to York in 1732 and was, like his father, appointed justice of the county court. By 1728 William had himself grown wealthy, and he married Elizabeth Carter Burwell of Gloucester County in a ceremony held at Rosewell, the Page family mansion. William now owned two lots in York located across from his father's house, the present Nelson house, which had been built between 1706 and 1732. 1738 was to be a busy year for the Nelsons of York County, Virginia. In that twelve-month period, "Scotch Tom's" second son, Thomas, returned from England, having completed his law training, William was appointed sheriff, and a son, Thomas, was born to William and Elizabeth. William entered politics at this time, and in 1742 he was elected to Burgesses. A year later Thomas, a promising young lawyer, was appointed Deputy Secretary of the Colony. This was a most important position as he acted in place of the Secretary who remained

in England. All of the Colony's business passed through this office, and the Deputy Secretary also sat as judge of the General Court. In addition to this position, Thomas was appointed county judge which meant that all three Nelsons, the father and two sons, sat as judges in the court of York County at the same time.

Age had forced "Scotch Tom" to take a less active role in his business. In 1743 he retired to enjoy his remaining years in the comfort of his home and watch his sons carry on the business which he had so successfully developed over the years. In 1745 Thomas, known to us as Secretary Thomas, married Lucy Amistead and probably moved to Williamsburg so he could be near the office. "Scotch Tom," on October 7, 1745, died, leaving a large estate. The house he left to his wife and after her death to William, Thomas Nelson (1677-1745), sea captain, merchant, husband, father, judge, land holder, mill operator, tavern owner, and ferry owner, died respected and remembered. The Virginia Gazette expressed the feelings of those who knew him when on October 10 the following eulogy appeared:

As he lived just, so was he blessed not only in the Increase of his Wealth but in the comfort of his children whom he lived to see . . . enjoying the greatest Honours and Preferments. As he lived truly revere'd and respected so he died greatly lamented.

Shortly after his father's death, William was appointed to the Council, a body of twelve men who were advisors to the governor. This body functioned as the legislative upper House in the Colony, and members were appointed for life terms. Secretary Thomas was appointed to Burgesses to take William's place.

As time passed Thomas and William felt the need to be located near the political center of the Colony in Williamsburg. In 1749, therefore, they

bought a house near the Capital for their use when they were in Williamsburg. William's son, Thomas, was sent to England for his education in 1753; upon his return to Virginia in 1761 he was promptly elected to Burgesses and made a county court judge. At this time he met and soon wed Lucy Grymes, daughter of a member of the Council. The newlyweds moved to York and within four years had moved into "Scotch Tom's" house on Main Street.

The ensuing years saw families raised, property acquired, crops planted and harvested, and relations with the mother country growing more strained. In 1769, in opposition to revenue raising taxes imposed by England, sixty-eight persons, including Thomas Nelson (the son of William), Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington, signed a pact refusing to import any English product taxed for revenue purposes. William, probably due to his position, did not sign this pact, but he did feel that the relations between England and the Colonies would be broken unless something were done. In 1772 William, president of the Council, died leaving his two sons to carry on the family business. Operating a big business was difficult for Thomas and Hugh so they promoted an experienced long-time employee, Augustine Moore, to partner in the firm to ease this situation. Thomas was elected to the Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia in 1776 where he signed the Declaration of Independence as a member of the Virginia delegation. However, due to poor health, he returned to Virginia in the latter part of 1777. In March of 1776 Thomas returned to Philadelphia but almost immediately suffered a slight stroke and was forced to come home. Simultaneously the family business was closed, the result of both bad times and the war.

The Revolution wore on, and Thomas continued to play an important role in the newly-born nation's struggle to be free. He raised militia forces and pledged his personal property to obtain money for the war effort. Thomas Jefferson's term as governor of Virginia expired in 1781, and Thomas Nelson, son of the President of Council, was sworn in as governor of the state on June 18, 1781. Later in that year the War moved into the Peninsula and then to York where the final decisive battle was fought. On October 19, 1781, Cornwallis surrendered nearly 7,500 troops to George Washington. Thomas, as Commander of the Virginia militia at York, must have felt a sense of relief for many reasons including the fact that he saw his home, though damaged, spared unlike that of his uncle Secretary Thomas whose home behind the British lines had been destroyed.

After the battle peace returned to Tidewater, and normal life was resumed. About this time murmurings were heard against the governor, accusing him of misappropriating funds and spending money without proper authorization. These charges were never brought to court, and eventually an investigating committee cleared him. Thomas, however, resigned from office in November of 1781 and retired to his 12,000 acre plantation "Offley Hoo" in Hanover County. Since he had pledged his personal property for money to continue the War and had not been repaid by the State, Thomas was now forced to sell some of his property to repay his debts.

1789 dawned anew; it was to be the year that the United States adopted a new Constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation and the year in which Thomas Nelson died at "Offley Hoo." Thomas Nelson had opposed the new Constitution, perhaps, because of its federal character, or because it lacked a bill of rights. Today, however, we do not remember Thomas

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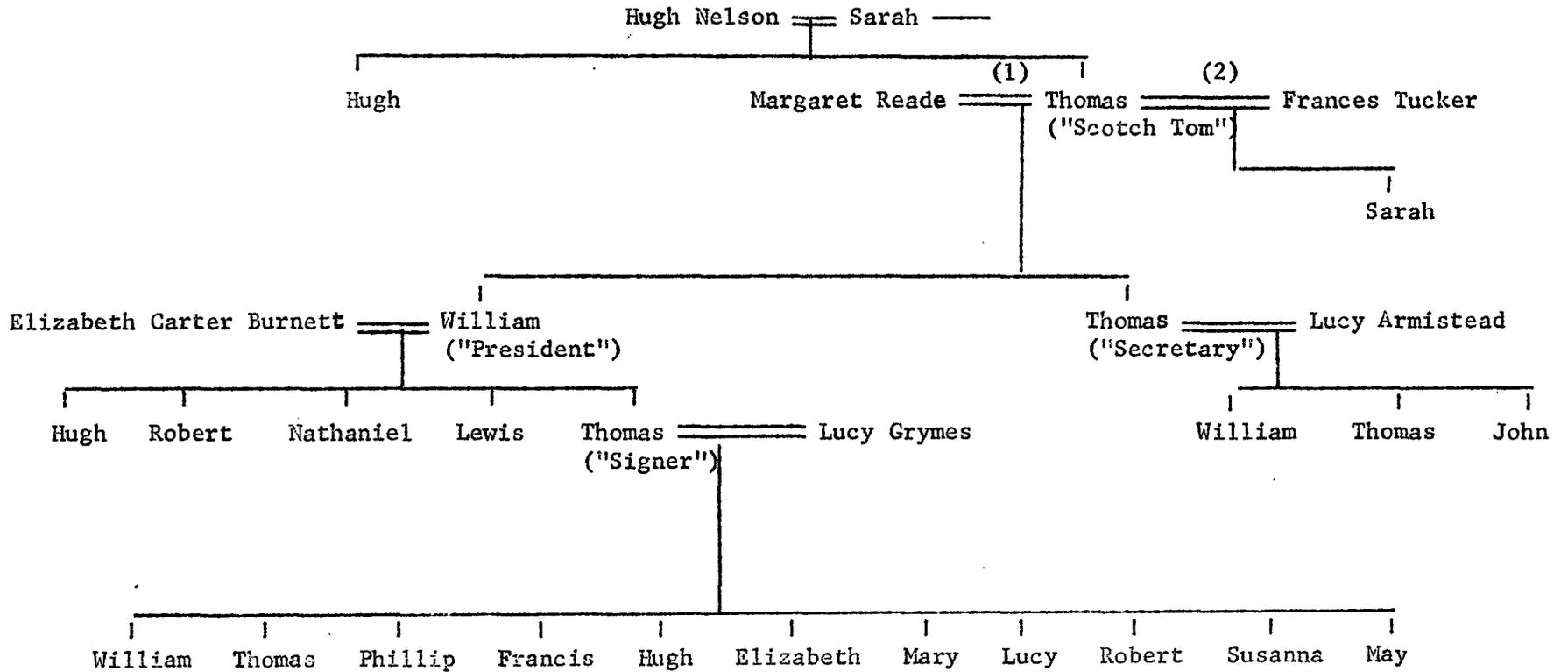
Jerome P. Forkner, Historian
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(Inscription on Thomas Nelson Jr.'s tombstone at Grace Church, Yorktown, Virginia)

Gen. Thomas Nelson, Jr.
Patriot Soldier Christian-Gentleman
Born Dec. 18, 1738 Died Jan. 2, 1789
Mover of the Resolution of May 5, 1776
in the Virginia Convention
Instructing her Delegates in Congress
to Move that Body to Declare the Colonies
Free and Independent States.
Signer of the Declaration of Independence
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We Gave all for Liberty

ABBREVIATED FAMILY CHART



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