



The Nelson House

Thomas Nelson Jr. (1738-89) was Yorktown's most famous son and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. His devotion to the patriot cause during the American Revolution contributed significantly to the creation of the United States.

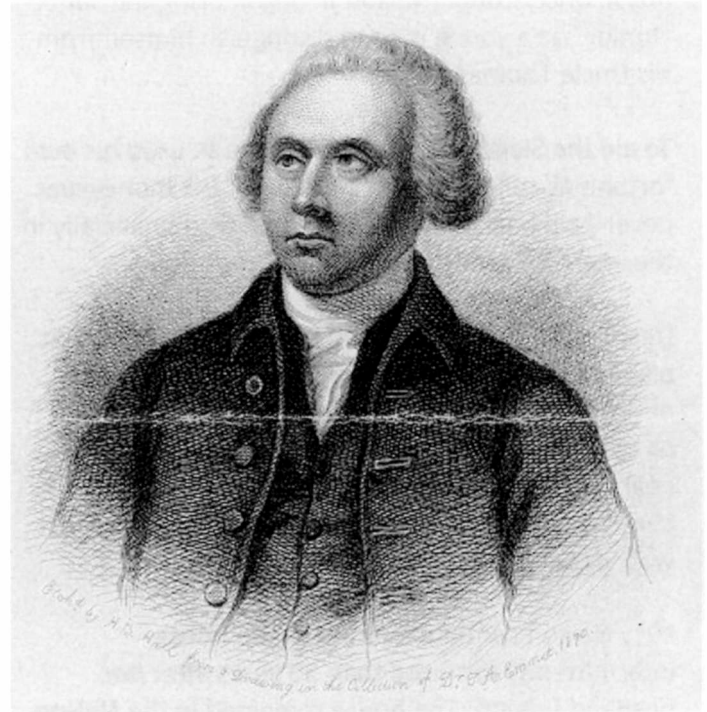
Nelson Jr.'s grandfather, "Scotch Tom" Nelson, immigrated to Yorktown from England as a young man, quickly establishing himself as a prosperous and influential merchant. He had the Nelson House constructed around 1730. Scotch Tom's son, William, inherited the merchant business and further increased the family's wealth by accumulating tobacco estates worked by hundreds of enslaved men and women.

Nelson Jr. moved into his grandfather's house with his young family in the 1760s. Together, with wife Lucy, the couple raised 11 children here. Nelson Jr. supported the patriot cause from early on, despite the reality that war could bring hardships to his wife and young children in Yorktown.

What do you think parents, including Nelson Jr. and Lucy, hoped a free and independent American would look like for their growing children? What do you hope or envision for the next generation of young Americans coming of age today?

Nelson Jr. served in the Virginia House of Burgesses throughout the 1760s and into the 1770s. He inherited the family business, estates, and enslaved Africans from his father. By the time the American Revolution erupted, he had become one of the most powerful and influential politicians in Virginia.

In a display of solidarity in 1774, Nelson Jr. called for the nonimportation of British goods when the news reached Virginia that Parliament was punishing Massachusetts for the property destroyed during the Boston Tea Party. Nelson Jr., joined by other community leaders, staged their own "Yorktown Tea Party" and threw two half-chests of tea into the York



River. It's this type of support for their fellow colonists that would make the American Revolution possible.

When's a time you stood up to support others?

In 1775, Nelson Jr. was chosen to represent Virginia at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. He joined his fellow delegates in signing the Declaration of Independence. His service in the Continental Congress continued until 1777, when he was forced to resign due to poor health and make the journey home to Virginia.

Nelson Jr. refused to let his health place him on the sidelines of the American Revolution, and he soon jumped back into action, succeeding Thomas Jefferson as Virginia's war-time governor.

What's a setback you've faced and overcome?

Nelson Jr. also commanded the Virginia militia during the 1781 Siege of Yorktown, where he focused on ensuring his soldiers were fed and supplied.

British General Charles Cornwallis used the home of Secretary Thomas Nelson, Nelson Jr.'s uncle, as his

headquarters during the siege. The house was badly damaged, and unlike the Nelson House, it no longer stands today. A wayside exhibit down the road from the Yorktown Victory Monument marks where this house once stood. (Nelson Jr. began using the suffix "Junior" as a young man to distinguish himself from his Uncle Thomas.).

To aid the Siege of Yorktown, Nelson Jr. used his own fortune as collateral to secure loans. His money was never paid back to him, and he suffered financially in the years following peace with Great Britain.

Despite the poor health and financial struggles that plagued him in the post-war years, Nelson Jr. was never bitter, stating that if he had to, he "would do it all over again." He died from an asthma attack six years after the war ended and was buried in the churchyard of Yorktown's Grace Church, just a short walk down the road from the Nelson House.

Lucy Nelson continued to live in the house intermittently for more than 30 years after her husband's death. The house remained in the Nelson family until 1908.

During the Civil War, the house served as a hospital for Union and Confederate forces. The National Park Service acquired the house in 1968 and restored it to its colonial appearance.

The Nelson House is one of the finest examples of early Georgian architecture in Virginia. Georgian architecture was popular in the 1700s because its simple, balanced appearance gave an impression of order and stability.

Can you spot evidence of symmetry as you explore the interior and exterior of the Nelson House?

Many of the house's features, such as the triangular pediment above the front door and the cornice (decorative molding) under the roof eaves, can be traced to ancient Greece and Rome.

Most of the Nelson House is original, including the bricks and much of the mortar in the outer walls.

Inside, the wall panels and many of the wooden floors are original; an exception being the downstairs

hall floor. The paint on the walls matches the color of the first paint applied when the house was constructed.

On the outer walls, you can spot two cannon balls embedded in the bricks. While the cannon balls are not original, the damage to the brickwork you see does date back to the 1781 Siege of Yorktown. A popular story tells how Thomas Nelson Jr. directed American artillerymen to fire at his house during the siege because he believed British officers were likely utilizing it. Whether truth or legend, the story reflects how the founding generation wanted to remember Nelson Jr.: as a man who was willing to sacrifice everything for the patriot cause.

How do you want to be remembered one day?

Notice the bricks above the windows and around the doors are a brighter color. These are "rubbed" bricks. The color was obtained by rubbing bricks together to make them straighter. These bricks were laid at corners, around openings, and along borders to achieve sharp, straight edges.

During the colonial period, many small outbuildings were clustered between the Nelson House and the present garden. These buildings were used as a kitchen, a wash house, a poultry house, a dairy house, a smoke house, a spinning house, and a servants' quarters. Another building, the Nelson store, which sold goods imported by the family business, stood across the street from the house.

Today, the Nelson House is open as staffing permits.

