

# Richard Arell, His Times, Tavern, and Neighbors

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Who was this Richard Arell whose tavern all of the Old Town groups of Alexandria were striving to save in the summer of 1964? Why were so many interested in this little building, in addition to its considerable architectural attraction as a double flounder house and a possible representative of an early building from the days near Alexandria's beginnings.

As regards the building itself, there has been architectural controversy, but some architects feel it should be saved for its own sake regardless of any historic interest attached to it.

To those familiar with the Diaries of George Washington, the name Arrell's or Arrol's is also familiar. Washington mentions dining or supping there some sixteen times between 1771 and 1774. Mr. Fitzpatrick, for unexplained and inexplicable reasons, identifies Arell's as the tavern of David Arell.<sup>1</sup> I say inexplicable in the light of Mr. Fitzpatrick's frequent citations of the account books which repeatedly speak of Richard Arell.

Some years ago, in the course of other work, a collection of tavern licences in the Fairfax Court Order and Minute Books developed. I found myself with a series of licences for Richard Arell "to keep an ordinary in Alexandria" running consecutively from 1768 to 1773, yet never a licence for David. Also discovered in this period, bound into the back of Fairfax County Minute Book 1756-1763 part 2, was a deed showing Richard Arell leasing a portion of lot 48 (bounded by Fairfax & King Streets, Market Alley and Market Place) to John Rick of Baltimore, in 1778. This piece is that on which this little building stands, a building which has interested many of us already for its own sake and which seemed to fit with some of the traditional references to Arell's tavern. The copy of the deed and the licence series went to Mt. Vernon for comment, which was to the effect that to err was human and on occasion Mr. Fitzpatrick erred, particularly as further material came to light.

But what makes this find important in terms of our National history, rather than just the association with Washington? Its importance lies in the fact that Washington dined there on July 5, 1774 following a "meeting of the Inhabitants."<sup>2</sup> The footnote gives us the clue that this was an epochal meeting, the first meeting of Fairfax County, which appointed a committee to draw up resolutions. George Mason and George Washington were among those appointed. The resolutions, which were largely the work of George Mason, were those Fairfax Resolves, which were to develop into the Virginia Bill of Rights. From this Bill comes, almost verbatim, the Bill of Rights of our Constitution. This

<sup>1</sup> *Diaries*. Vol. 2, p. 43n.

<sup>2</sup> *Diaries*. Vol. 2, p. 156.

needs neither further description or documentation here. It is all well presented in Doctor Robert Allen Rutland's two books: "George Mason, Reluctant Statesman" and "The Birth of the Bill of Rights." George Washington's correspondence shows his deep interest and views. His letter to Bryan Fairfax, written July 4, 1774,<sup>3</sup> the night before the meeting, is a typical exposition of Washington's views. The meeting must have been a lively one and human nature can not have so changed in two hundred years that the discussion would not have continued on through the dinner session. The Court House, whose walls echoed the formal session of the meeting, is now gone. But Arell's Tavern must have rung with the same discussion, less formally and, as of this writing, the walls of the alleged Arell's Tavern are still standing.

It was safe to hold such a discussion at Arell's, a discussion which was verging on sedition. Freedom of speech was one of the points of these resolves and bills. Bacon's Rebellion was but a short century in the past and those now fast approaching another rebellion knowingly risked the hangings and confiscations which followed the failure of the earlier uprising. They risked the fate of that Thomas Hansford whose wife was left widowed and estateless for his part in Bacon's rebellion.<sup>4</sup> But Richard Arell was a sympathetic host, one who was shortly to put himself on public record as a "Friend of American Freedom" in a letter, dated October 14, 1774, to the Printer of the Williamsburg paper, the Virginia Gazette.<sup>5</sup> There were some thirty names on this letter, including William Ramsay, George Gilpin, John Fitzgerald, James & John Muir.

With this for inspiration and such a starting base, the hunt was on for a complete documentation. Mr. Frank Morse of Mt. Vernon supplied a list of all the Arell references in the Washington Account Books. These showed a longer period of transactions, both for meals and some catering for election day refreshments, than we had previously known. They ran from March 28, 1765<sup>6</sup> to December 27, 1774<sup>7</sup>. Tavern licences for the earlier dates could not be matched up, since court record books for the period 1763 to 1768 seem missing both in Fairfax and Richmond. The licence of 16 November 1773 carries into 1774<sup>8</sup> since licences were good for a year and then to the next court session.<sup>9</sup>

Despite missing deed books, the title search was clear and easy, with indications along the line of continued use of the location as a place of entertainment in deeds and chattel mortgages. The present building is still remembered as Zimmerman's Oyster House, its last such use before the Hulfish's bought it. A search was also done on the rest of Lot 48 which showed that Richard Arell had subdivided and either sold or leased the rest of the lot well before 1778, retain-

<sup>3</sup> Writings of Washington, Vol. 3, pl. 227 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Tyler, Vol. 1, p. 255.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Gazette: PD 10 Nov. 74:33.

<sup>6</sup> Ledger A, folio 203, Washington Acts.

<sup>7</sup> Ledger B, folio 130, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Court Order Book, Fairfax. 1772-1774, p. 291.

<sup>9</sup> Jefferson papers, Vol. 2, p. 447 & Hening, Vol. VI, pp. 71-76.

ing only the portion described in the lease to Rick. This lease states "and edifices thereon." It also shows part of the land adjacent on the south occupied by one Michael Gretter. Subsequent to the commencement of this article, a clause has been found in the reentry procedure on John Rick for non-payment of rent in 1811 which casts a cloud on the possibility that the *present* building is the original tavern.<sup>31</sup>

From whom Richard Arell acquired lot 48 is unknown. The general index of deeds for 1742–1797, at Fairfax, shows several possibilities for 1763–1765 as being in missing deed book F.

Gretter himself is of interest, one might speculate that he was possibly a tenant before Arell acquired Lot 48. The first record of Gretter's presence in the town is a licence, granted in August, 1759, "to keep an ordinary in his home in Alexandria."<sup>10</sup> Michael Gretter was the gaoler, and his accounts appear in many court Order books, as well as in the accounts of Richards, Harrison & Co., in 1779.<sup>11</sup> He figures in many a suit for debt and assault and battery, which last might be considered under the head of an occupational hazard. In 1783 there is a partition of the land providing for his ladylove, Molly Burnett and her children by him.<sup>12</sup> Entertainingly, the tax records show them as Arell tenants on Love Alley;<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Gretter is on King Street! A Margaret Gretter appears in the tax records—Mrs. Gretter?—who seems as hardy as Michael. On November 1, 1787 she advertises in the *Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser* that she has just imported a "MACHINE called a mangle by which silk, linen, and cotton stockings and other articles are smoothed and glossed." It may be used or rented at her house on King Street. Michael, in the mean time had been appointed Seargeant in 1780, by the new Hustings Court,<sup>14</sup> and continued on, his accounts being reported in 1783.<sup>15</sup> He is coming up in the world, since in 1784 Gretter and Richard Arell go bond for Arell's son-in-law,<sup>16</sup> Cyrus Copper, as vendue master.<sup>17</sup> Not having completed this set of microfilm, I can not say how much longer Michael Gretter continued with his tavern, the last licence met to date is that of April 1784.<sup>18</sup> Both Richard Arell and Michael Gretter had sites which, in the phraseology of many an old advertisement "is of a convenience second to none," however different their clientele. Not only are they adjacent to the Court house and the Gaol—as is mentioned in the deed from Richard Arell to William Alli-

<sup>31</sup> Alexandria Deed Book U 1800–1811, p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> Fairfax Court Order Book 1756–1763, part 1, p. 403.

<sup>11</sup> R, H & Co., p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Alexandria Corporation Court Deed Book I, p. 270.

<sup>13</sup> Alexandria Land Book, 1787.

<sup>14</sup> Alexandria Hustings Court Order Book, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Alexandria Deed Book Liber T., p. 449.

<sup>17</sup> Hustings Ct., p. 68.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 60.

son for a lot backing on the Arell Tavern premises, and facing Fairfax Street,<sup>19</sup> but there was the school as early as 1759, "in the most convenient place" on the Court House Lot.<sup>20</sup> The Market house was nearby and in 1784 there was a petition to enlarge it.<sup>21</sup> The convenience to the Court House is emphasized by that occasion in 1768 when, in the course of a land suit between John Carlyle and John Alexander, the jury, by consent of both parties adjourns "to the House of Richard Arell and be entertained at the expense of both parties."<sup>22</sup>

Who then was this Richard Arell? Though he is clearly well known in his day, details are now lost in the mists of time.

We know what both Richard and Eleanor Arell looked like prior to 1775, the period which interests us most now. Portraits of them by John Wollaston are owned by Mr. & Mrs. Elias Edmunds Gray, IV.<sup>23</sup> Both Arell's have strong faces which manage to dominate the dominating style characteristic of Wollaston's work. Richard Arell is not the genial and gentle appearing boniface of John Gadsby. He seems as different from Gadsby as from Gretter. Gretter was either in frequent bad luck, poor in judgment or naturally litigious. Arell is none of these things, and seldom appears in the courts. One wonders why Arell gave up his tavern, was it the approaching war, or perhaps a changing clientele? But he is clearly a prudent business man who let his properties out for long term rentals, arranging for these to be divided on his demise to provide income for his wife and other heirs. We know that Arell was a "constant reader" of the news,<sup>5</sup> yet he did not use the press, apparently, for advertising. Since John Rick came from Baltimore we had hoped to find an advertisement in the Baltimore papers which might have lured him to Alexandria. But no advertisements by Arell appear among those put in the Baltimore and Annapolis papers of the period by other Alexandrians.

Richard Arell first appears in the records with his purchase, in 1762, from George Mason, of Lot 53 (SW corner of King and Fairfax Streets).<sup>24</sup> Arell is already so well established in the community as to be described in this deed as "of Alexandria. . Merchant." However, Brockett says that Richard Arell came with his wife and children, David and Samuel, from Pennsylvania.<sup>25</sup> His grandchildren married into the Lowe, Hunter and Marsteller families.<sup>15 16 25</sup> We do not know what types of merchandise he handled. Whatever it was, Arell's business prospered and he bought much land in the community. The unidentified purchases listed in the general index for missing deed books (at Fairfax) F and N may account for his acquisition of lots 60 and 72, as well as 48, which he

<sup>19</sup> Fairfax Deed Book Liber L, p. 232.

<sup>20</sup> Fairfax Minute Book 1756-1763 part 1, p. 345.

<sup>21</sup> Fairfax Order Book 1783-1788, p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> Fairfax Land Records of Long Standing, p. 238.

<sup>23</sup> Our Town catalogue, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Fairfax Deed Book Liber E, p. 102 & 104.

<sup>25</sup> Brockett, p. 96.

clearly had to dispose, in transactions which have stood up under suits and two generations of estates of intestate decease and guardianships. Another unidentified acquisition is that of lots 90 and 91, which as a supporter of his church, he gave to the Presbyterian Meeting House, in the trust of the Clergyman.<sup>26</sup> Whether or not his other views may have been influenced by Presbyterianism, we know that he was firm and daring in his political views, and in helping to promote those liberties by which we now live—not always appreciating or understanding them.

He also bought lots 69 and 70 from Nathaniel Harrison in 1775.<sup>27</sup> Eventually he built his "Mansion House" on lot 70 and therein he died.<sup>28</sup> The 1796 tax records speak of Richard Arell's Estate.<sup>29</sup> But in the end, when departing into the mysteries of the world beyond, Richard Arell leaves us with a final mystery. Could the funeral listed for "Arell, H" in the Register of the Presbyterian Meeting House, dated July 28, 1796,<sup>30</sup> really be the record of the funeral of Richard Arell? It would indeed be ironical if this mislabelling, which seemed to be his fate, applied to this the last of his worldly affairs. If "Arell H." is in reality Arell, Richard, then he died of consumption in his 77th year.

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<sup>26</sup> Fairfax Deed Book Liber L, p. 215.

<sup>27</sup> Fairfax Deed Book Liber G, p. 33.

<sup>28</sup> Alexandria Deed Book I, p. 39 & K, p. 430.

<sup>29</sup> Alexandria Land Books, 1796.

<sup>30</sup> Alexandria Presbyterian Meeting House register p. 5.

(Continued on page 36.)