

When Did John Ball Receive His Land and Build His Cabin?

BY KARL VANNEWKIRK

A discussion of the date (year) when John Ball built the cabin now called the Ball-Sellers House usually starts with the date he received his land grant from Lord Fairfax: January 15, 1742. Willard Webb, in his excellent article, “John Ball and the Northern Neck Proprietary”¹ included both a facsimile of the hand-written land grant, and a transcription; Charles W. Stetson, in “Four Mile Run Land Grants,”² also included a transcription of the land grant. There it is, clear as day: “Dated the fifteenth day of January in the Sixteenth year of the Reign of our sovereign Lord George the Second by grace of God of great Brittain [sic] France & Ireland King Defender of the Faith & Annie One thousand seven hundred & forty two.”

Not so fast! Although Catholic countries adopted the modern Gregorian calendar beginning in 1582, Protestant countries, including Great Britain and its American colonies, retained the Julian, or “Old Style,” calendar for some time. The changeover for Great Britain and its colonies occurred in 1752. Of particular interest in John Ball’s case, under the Julian calendar the civil or legal year began on March 25, not January 1. To quote from the Wikipedia article on the subject:

During the years of transition between the first introduction of the Gregorian calendar in continental Europe and its introduction in Britain, contemporary usage in England started to change.³ In Britain 1 January was celebrated as the New Year festival, but the “year starting 25th March was called the Civil or Legal Year, although the phrase Old Style was more commonly used.” To reduce misunderstandings about the date, it was normal in parish registers to place a new year heading after 24 March (for example “1661”) and another heading at the end of the following December, “1661/62”, to indicate that in the following few weeks the year was 1661 Old Style but 1662 New Style. Some more modern sources, often more academic ones, also use the “1661/62” style for the period between 1 January and 25 March for years before the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in England.

In contrast, the United States, which was part of the British Empire at the time, used the Julian calendar. The United States typically translates notable events that happened prior to the transition into New Style dates; for example,

the birthday of General and President George Washington is recognised (and historically was celebrated until 1970) as being February 22, 1732, even though the calendar in use at the time Washington was born read February 11, 1731 on the date of his birth.

To determine whether John Ball's land was granted in 1741/42, or in 1742/43, we must look further. There are at least two clues: First, the grant was made to "John Ball of the County of Fairfax" (emphasis added). Fairfax County was created on June 19, 1742 (after the apparent date of the grant), although the act of creation had passed the House of Burgesses the year prior. Stetson explains the discrepancy by writing, "William Fairfax [Lord Fairfax's agent], who was then a Burgess for Prince William County, was anticipating its passage when he located the land in Fairfax County."⁴ A simpler alternative explanation would be that the grant was made in 1742/43, and that both John Ball and the land were indeed in Fairfax County at the time.

More definitively, the grant is dated in the 16th year of the reign of George II. George II ascended the throne on June 11, 1727 (O.S.) . The 16th year of his reign thus began on June 11, 1742, and ended on June 10, 1743. John Ball's land was granted during that interval – or in 1742/43. And if we convert the date of the grant to full "U.S. modern style" as described in the Wikipedia article, it becomes January 26, 1743.

Endnotes

¹ Willard Webb, "John Ball and the Northern Neck Proprietary," *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2009, pp.7-24

² Charles Stetson, *Four Mile Run Land Grants*, (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books, 2001), pp.89-91.

³ Mike Spathaky, *Old Style and New Style Dates and the change to the Gregorian Calendar: A Summary for Genealogists*, <http://www.cree.name/genuki/dates.htm> (Retrieved 08/22/16).

⁴ Stetson, *Four Mile Run Land Grants*, p. 91.

About the Author

Karl VanNewkirk recently completed his fourth term as President of the Arlington Historical Society (1991-1992, 1994-1995, 2015-2017). He has been a once-a-month docent at the Museum since the early 1990s and was the editor of the annual Magazine until 1992-2015. He was a member of the Board of Directors of the Arlington Black Heritage Museum from its inception until 2009 and currently works as a volunteer for the archeology department at Gunston Hall. He has taught an annual course on the history of Arlington for Encore Learning since 2003.