

## THOMAS LEE AT THE SPOUT OF THE POTOMAC\*

By LUDWELL LEE MONTAGUE †

Few people are aware that Thomas Lee, best known as the builder of "Stratford" in Westmoreland County, was also an early landholder in what is now Arlington County. It is my purpose to tell you about that, but first I must tell you about Thomas Lee himself, his origins, and how he came to be interested in this part of Virginia.

This Thomas Lee was a grandson of Richard Lee, who arrived at Jamestown in 1639 and became one of the leading men in Virginia. At the time of his death, in 1664, he was an important London merchant in the Virginia trade, a great landholder in Virginia, and a member of the Council at Jamestown. That body of about a dozen men served as the Governor's privy council or cabinet, as the upper house of the colonial legislature, and as the colonial supreme court. (There was then no doctrine of the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers.)

Thomas Lee's maternal grandfather, Henry Corbin, came to Virginia in 1654. He too was a great landholder and a member of the Council.

Thomas Lee was the son of Richard Lee II and Letitia Corbin. His father was a notable "scholar in the wilderness," a graduate of Oxford who had what was probably the finest library in the Virginia of his day. He jotted down in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew his notes on the management of his several plantations. He too was a member of the Council. He was also the Naval Officer (that is, the collector of customs) for the south shore of the Potomac, a more remunerative office.

Thomas Lee was born at his father's Machodoc plantation in Westmoreland County, in 1690. He was educated at the newly established College of William and Mary. But he was a fifth son, with little prospect of inheritance. He would have to make his own fortune. He had the enterprise and the energy required to do that.

The decisive event in Thomas Lee's life occurred in 1711, when he was 21. He was then made the resident manager of the Fairfax Proprietary, all the land between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers, some six million acres. In this vast area young Thomas Lee exercised, in the name of Lady Catherine Fairfax, the prerogatives of the Crown of England with respect to the granting of lands and the collection of quit-rents.

The previous manager of the Fairfax estate in Virginia had been Robert Carter, called "King" Carter because of his imperious manner. "King" Carter was engaged in a struggle with the Governor, Alexander Spotswood,

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\* In colonial times the narrow channel of the Potomac below the Little Falls was called "the Spout," an apt name.

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to determine which of them was "Boss" in Virginia. The interests of Lady Fairfax were among the least of his concerns. He had been rather casual in the administration of her estate.

Lady Catherine sensed that, and turned for advice to Thomas Corbin, a Virginia merchant in London who happened to be Thomas Lee's uncle. The result was that she sent her power of attorney to young Thomas Lee. "King" Carter must have been enraged at being superseded by such a stripling.

Thomas Lee entered upon his task with vigor and enthusiasm. He opened a land office at Machodoc and put the affairs of the Fairfax Proprietary on a businesslike basis for the first time. For example, it had long been customary for applicants for land grants to understate the acreage in order to reduce the quit-rent. Lee required them to attach an accurate survey to each application, which greatly curtailed that practice. Lady Catherine was highly pleased by the substantial increase in her income from Virginia. The landless Thomas Lee was making a nice income too.

He soon gained another source of income. His father resigned as Naval Officer, pleading infirmity, and Governor Spotswood immediately appointed Thomas Lee to that office. That appointment had probably been arranged in advance. Spotswood was under obligations to Richard Lee for political support in his struggle with "King" Carter. No doubt the "King" made another mark in his black book against the name of Thomas Lee.

Richard Lee II died in 1715, leaving Thomas 350 acres in Northumberland County and 1,300 acres on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He left the Machodoc plantation to his eldest son, Richard, but this Richard Lee III was a prosperous Virginia merchant in London. He leased Machodoc to his younger brothers, Thomas and Henry, for the annual rent of one peppercorn only, payable on Christmas Day.

With these lands, the Naval Office, and the Fairfax agency, Thomas Lee prospered. By 1718 he had accumulated sufficient means to purchase for himself the future site of "Stratford."<sup>1</sup>

In 1722 Thomas Lee had to surrender the Fairfax land office to "King" Carter. After the death of Lady Catherine, in 1719, the "King" had seized the opportunity to lease the entire Fairfax Proprietary from her 18-year-old son and heir for a fixed annual rent. But ten years in the Fairfax land office had a profound effect on Thomas Lee. He might have been content to be a substantial planter on tidewater. Instead he devoted the rest of his life to empire-building in the West. Of that more anon.

In 1720, when he was thirty, Thomas Lee decided that the time had come for him to enter the ruling circle in Virginia, through election to the House of Burgesses. His candidacy was considered highly presumptuous, for neither of the two incumbent Burgesses from Westmoreland was disposed

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<sup>1</sup>The purchase of 1718 was only 1,400 acres, but in 1732 Lee acquired another 2,700, so that the total acreage of the Stratford plantation was 4,100.

to retire. Nevertheless, Thomas Lee ran and was elected. The man whom he displaced was his own brother-in-law, Daniel McCarty, who had been for five years Speaker of the House.<sup>2</sup>

It was also high time for Thomas Lee to marry. The girl who caught his attention during his first session as a Burgess was Hannah Ludwell, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Philip Ludwell II and Hannah Harri-



Mrs. Thomas Lee (Hannah Ludwell)  
1701-1749

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Lee's only sister, Ann, married first William Fitzhugh. She was thus the great-grandmother of that Mary Fitzhugh of Alexandria who married Washington Custis of "Arlington." After Fitzhugh's death in 1714 she married Daniel McCarty.

son, of "Green Spring," near Jamestown. There is no doubt that Thomas Lee became very fond of Hannah, but he would not have been a man of the 18th Century if he had not noticed that her father was a member of the Council, that she had good prospects of inheritance, and that she already possessed a fortune in pounds sterling left to her by her grandfathers, Philip Ludwell I and Benjamin Harrison.

Thomas Lee and Hannah Ludwell were married at "Green Spring" in May 1722. It appears that it was Hannah's fortune that built "Stratford." She also gave Thomas Lee eight sons and three daughters. Her five sons that were surviving at the time of the Revolution were all distinguished patriots. They were Thomas Ludwell, Richard Henry, Francis Lightfoot, William, and Arthur Lee.

Although Thomas Lee made his home at "Stratford," continued to operate four plantations on tidewater, continued to serve as Naval Officer for the south shore of the Potomac, and continued to represent Westmoreland at Williamsburg, his overriding interest was in the development of new lands in the West. Between 1718 and 1744 he took out Fairfax land grants amounting to more than 23,000 acres in what are now the counties of Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Fauquier.<sup>3</sup> In addition, he acquired by purchase 4,200 acres in Stafford County.

Of these extensive landholdings, the one of particular interest in the history of Arlington extended along the Spout of the Potomac from what is now known as Donaldson Run to the Little Falls. In modern terms, its inland boundary ran up Donaldson Run and a branch thereof to Thomas Street; thence northward, generally west of Military Road and through the overpass that carries Old Glebe Road over the new road, to Pimmit Run at a point about 900 yards above its mouth; thence up Pimmit Run to a point southwest of Fort Marcey; thence a little west of north (including Fort Marcey) to the river at the Little Falls. This tract was made up of land grants taken out in 1719 and 1729.

Two ancient Indian trails, one from the Sugarlands on Broad Run, the other from the upper valley of Four Mile Run, converged at the mouth of Pimmit Run, the first break in the Potomac Palisades below the Little Falls. Thomas Lee engaged Francis Awbrey to establish there a landing, a ferry, and an inn. He hoped to develop there a commercial depot through which must flow all the future trade of the country above the Falls.

In 1728 a son of "King" Carter discovered what he believed to be a rich deposit of copper ore near the future site of Herndon. The old "King" quickly patented that land, then looked about for a way to get his ore to

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<sup>3</sup> In modern terms, but with the acreages as stated in the land grants, these six tracts were: (1) 378 acres along the Spout of the Potomac; (2) 2,600 acres bounded by the Potomac, Pimmit Run, and Dead Run, including Langley and McLean; (3) 4,500 acres on Difficult Run; (4) 3,200 acres at the northwest corner of the Dulles International Airport; (5) 8,300 acres extending inland from the Potomac between Broad Run and Goose Creek; and (6) 4,200 acres surrounding Warrenton.

navigable water. Thomas Lee's landing at the mouth of Pimmit Run seemed the best place. Lee would gladly have permitted Carter to use his landing on payment of appropriate wharfage fees, but the "King" demanded that Lee surrender his title to that land in exchange for land elsewhere.

At this time "King" Carter was at the height of his power. In 1722 he had obtained the dismissal of Alexander Spotswood as Governor and the appointment of a man of his own choice in his stead. As President of the Council, he had himself been acting Governor, 1726-1727, during a vacancy in the governorship. Moreover, as lessee of the Fairfax Proprietary, he was himself, in effect, the Lord Proprietor.

Despite his great political power and personal prestige, "King" Carter could not move Thomas Lee, who simply refused to surrender his patent. In a rage against Lee, Carter refused to use his landing and instead built a long road from the "copper mine" to the mouth of the Occoquan. Only then did Carter discover that there was no copper in the greenish earth taken from his "mine."

The final irony in the relationship between these two men was that when Thomas Lee was appointed to the Council, in 1733, it was to take the seat vacated by the death of "King" Carter.

Lee proceeded to establish a grist mill and an official tobacco inspection warehouse at the mouth of Pimmit Run. The Falls Warehouse drew enough business to warrant the development of the ancient Indian trails as rolling roads. (They are now Little Falls Road and Fairfax Road.) But Lee's landing did not develop as a commercial center. It could be reached only by lighters, and that only with great difficulty going against the swift current of the Spout. The Scottish merchants who were beginning to monopolize overseas trade preferred to establish themselves at the sites of Alexandria and Georgetown, where sea-going ships could discharge and take on cargo.

Francis Awbrey died in 1741, leaving his ferry and inn to his son Richard. In 1748 Richard Awbrey moved the ferry to Analostan Island (now Roosevelt Island), opposite the site of Georgetown.

In 1744 Councillor Thomas Lee went to Lancaster, in Pennsylvania, and there negotiated a treaty with the Iroquois whereby they ceded to Virginia all of their lands west of the Blue Ridge and east and south of the Ohio River. In 1748 he founded the Ohio Company, composed of Virginians interested in promoting settlement on the Ohio. The Company obtained from the Crown a grant of 500,000 acres for that purpose and built a fort near the site of Pittsburgh, then supposed to be in Virginia.

In this undertaking, Thomas Lee and his associates were, of course, interested in promoting their personal fortunes, but they were also interested in extending the frontier of Virginia into the Ohio Valley, in order to forestall the French from Canada. The French reacted by destroying the Ohio Company's fort and building Fort Duquesne at the forks of the



Thomas Lee in his robes as Councillor of State.  
1690-1750

Ohio. That precipitated the French and Indian War (the Seven Year's War in Europe). But I have got ahead of my story, for Thomas Lee did not live to see the destruction of his fort on the Ohio.

In September 1749 Thomas Lee, as President of the Council, became President and Commander-in-Chief of Virginia during a vacancy in the governorship. That was the highest political position to which a Virginian could aspire in colonial times. Lee held it until his death in November 1750.

In 1772 Thomas Lee's eldest son and heir, Philip Ludwell Lee, made a new attempt to establish a town at the mouth of Pimmit Run. He was pleased to call the place Philee, but he died in 1775 and nothing came of it.

Phil Lee's land on the Spout of the Potomac was divided between his daughters, Matilda and Flora, but Matilda Lee's husband, Henry ("Light Horse Harry") Lee, bought up Flora's share of it. In 1789 he and Matilda sold off seven "fish stands" along the Spout. These "fish stands" all had picturesque proper names, indicating that they had been long established, presumably as leaseholds. They were called "Flat Rock," "the Warehouse Eddy," "Shelving Rock," "Upper Deep Stand," "Lower Deep Stand," "Three Step Stand," and "Dangerous Rock."<sup>4</sup> In 1789 also, the Lees sold the remainder of the property to Philip Richard Fendall of Alexandria. Fendall had married, second, Matilda's widowed mother, and, third, Henry Lee's sister.

At the mouth of Pimmit Run, Fendall developed an establishment that included a granary, a grist mill, a distillery, a brewery, cooper's and blacksmith's shops, and cottages for the workmen. The residence of the local manager, Lewis Hipkins, was on the promontory between the Potomac and Pimmit Run. The building of the Falls Bridge, in 1797, gave Fendall an easy way to get his products to Georgetown. Although an Alexandrian, Fendall was a member of the Falls Bridge Company.<sup>5</sup>

Fendall died in 1805. In 1806 the entire property was sold to Francis Green, of Medford, Massachusetts, who evidently considered it a good investment. I have not traced its history beyond that point.

Thomas Lee failed in his plan to develop a great commercial center at the mouth of Pimmit Run, but he was a great Virginia in his day, and a leader in the development of the upper Potomac in particular. In 1758 the town of Leesburg was named in his honor. Arlington can take pride in his part in its early history and his confidence in its future—although Thomas Lee would certainly be astonished if he could see Arlington today!

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<sup>4</sup> In 1631 Henry Fleet described the remarkable catches made by the Indians during the spring run of "sturgeon" (shad and herring) in the Spout. These "fish stands" had been in use since prehistoric Indian times. They are still used by swarms of fishermen every spring.

<sup>5</sup> The Falls Bridge was built by the merchants of Georgetown to draw the trade of the Leesburg area away from Alexandria to Georgetown.