

160 FAIRFAX, FERDINANDO

Publisher

Charlestown

Intended publisher of the proposed *Farmers' Museum* at Charlestown in early 1808.

Ferdinando Fairfax was a scion of Virginia's largest landholding family. The Fairfax Grant of 1649 encompassed all lands between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers; by 1735, the grant had been conveyed to Thomas, the sixth Lord Fairfax, a fourth-generation descendant of the original grantee: a seventeenth-century Royalist general, who was also Ferdinando's namesake; Thomas was the first Fairfax to reside on the family's extensive Virginia property. Famously, Thomas employed and befriended the young surveyor George Washington, so entwining their two families in the pre-Revolutionary era. At his death, his property fell to his sons, George William and Bryan, Ferdinando's father. Eventually, Ferdinando inherited the estate of his childless uncle and a large part of his father's when Bryan Fairfax turned to a ministerial calling in 1789.

This background made Ferdinando Fairfax into one of the more prominent personages in the mid-Potomac River valley. He was born at his father's Shannon Hill estate in modern-day Jefferson (then Berkeley) County in 1774; George and Martha Washington stood as his god-parents at his christening. His father's withdrawal from commerce and politics just as Ferdinando reached maturity gave him important advantages. While maintaining the family estate at Mount Eagle outside Alexandria (a site just south of the west end of the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge today), and its business interests there, his primary focus was on developing the neighborhood around Shannon Hill. In 1795, he was a founding trustee of the Charles Town Academy, the town's first "public" school. And by 1798, he conducted a brick-making factory and iron works near there. All the while, he operated a large plantation with more than sixty enslaved workers. Thus, Fairfax became a key player in the movement to split off the eastern third of Berkeley County into a new Jefferson County, and so pull that neighborhood away from the commercial domination of Martinsburg. Not surprisingly, he was named as a justice of the new county court in 1801.

The choice of that county name reveals the political inclination of Fairfax and his colleagues. The journal of record for Berkeley County had just recently become the avidly-Federalist *Martinsburg Gazette* of John Alburtis (004); and for the initial years of Jefferson's existence, the county court was dependent on his paper and the *Winchester Gazette* of the Federalist editor Richard Bowen (045) for publishing public notices, in effect subsidizing their political opponents. Twice, in 1803 and 1804, the county's Republican leaders attempted publishing a Charlestown-based journal of record with a suitable perspective, both from the press of local job-printer William Brown (058), another avowed Federalist; each quickly failed.

Fairfax moved to resolve the situation in the winter of 1807-08. He circulated a prospectus and subscription sheets then for a new *Farmers' Museum* at Charlestown, apparently in mind of the coming presidential election. But by spring, Fairfax had removed himself from any overt involvement in the project. He "sold" his newly-developed subscriber list to one Richard Williams (447), a writer with aspirations to fame as a Jeffersonian editor. Williams formed a limited partnership with Brown to produce the *Farmers' Repository* for him, which

then made its first appearance on April 1st. It is likely that Fairfax remained a silent financial partner in the paper, especially as Brown left Charlestown abruptly at the end of the paper's first year, after having conducted a profitable job-printing shop there from the first days of the town's designation as a county seat, suggesting that his departure was forced. Fairfax's involvement is also suggested by the fact that Williams was able to continue the newspaper alone, with minimal trained help, until 1827; clearly, he now had a solid financial foundation where the previous journalistic efforts had not, and Fairfax had money to spend.

Indeed, Fairfax's free spending ways were prominently noted in his obituary in 1820. The writer described him as "sober, frugal, and industrious, yet more money escaped from him than from any other man." But his growing family (eventually sixteen living children) also forced a divestiture of assets during the War of 1812, when he sold his brick-making factory in Jefferson and moved his iron works to Alexandria; that growth also obliged the family's relocation to Alexandria where education and society were more readily available. Those circumstances pressed on his health, and he died at Mount Eagle in September 1820. He was buried in Ivy Hill Cemetery with full Masonic orders, just as Fairfax had conducted the funeral of George Washington in 1799, his brother Mason in the Alexandria lodge.

Personal Data

Born: In 1774 Jefferson (then Berkeley) County, VA/WV.
Married ca. 1795 Elizabeth Blair Cary @ Alexandria, Virginia.
Died: Sept. 24 1820 Mount Eagle, Alexandria, Virginia.
Children: Sally & Thomas (b. 1796), George William (b. 1797), Wilson Miles Cary (b. 1798), Farinda (b. 1800), Ferdinando & Mary Monro (b. 1803), William Henry (b. 1804), Louisa W. (b. 1805), Eliza Christiana (b. 1806), Bryan (d. 1808), Archibald Blair (b. 1809), Washington (b. 1813), Octavius Fairfax (b. 1810), Herbert (b. 1815), Floretta (b. 1816), Edwin (b. 1818).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; MESDA Index nos. 11138, 42633; *Artisans & Merchants*; Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*; Meade, *Old Churches*; Tyler's Encyclopedia; Rasmussen & Tilton, *George Washington*; Fairfax County, Virginia Will Books; newspaper notices in Alexandria Advertiser 1800-1815; obituary in City of Washington Gazette, 28 Sept 1820; genealogical data on children from Fairfax family charts posted on Ancestry.com (September 2012); birth & death dates from his gravestone.