

494 HINGSTON, NICHOLAS

Engraver

Alexandria

Engraver living in Georgetown (1795) and Alexandria (1798-1830).

Nicholas Hingston is best remembered as one of the early-Republic's foremost botanists. Yet few recognize that following his arrival in America in 1790, he also conducted a sideline business in the District of Columbia as a copperplate engraver. It is also forgotten that his emigration to the United States was induced by a scandalous land deal aimed at exploiting a group of emigres fleeing the uproar unleashed in Paris by the French Revolution.

The first half of Hingston's long life was a decidedly obscure one in Europe. While reportedly born in the rural English county of Devonshire, nothing of his early life is discernable, given the large number of families with his surname in that county. Indeed the surviving record of his life begins when the Revolution erupted in France in 1789. At that time, he was working as a copperplate engraver in Paris while selling seeds and plants as a result of his interest in horticulture. Later accounts indicate that he had been engaged in that trade for most of his life, suggesting that Hingston took up engraving as a way to support his studies by selling prints or to illustrate the studies he (or others) conducted; but that thought is speculative, as the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in Paris does not record anything under his name in its catalogues.

In the winter of 1789-90, Hingston became part of a venture to relocate approximately 500 urban Parisians to a new settlement on the north bank of the Ohio River in North America. The scheme was one promoted by the Scioto Land Company, essentially a land-speculation venture initiated by Col. William Duer (1743-99), a Federalist congressman from New York; in 1787, he used his influence to acquire for the company an option on a substantial tract of land on the Ohio River from the even-greater option granted to the Ohio Company the year before; his intent was buy the tract from them after having bought up all of the outstanding debt obligations owed to French interests by the United States, at a discount, with funds raised from prospective settlers in France. To that end, Duer gave Joel Barlow (1754-1812), the essayist and poet from Connecticut, an interest in the arrangement if he would travel to Europe to enlist those settlers. Barlow's initial efforts in 1788 lagged, but once the violence so often associated with the Revolution there broke out in the summer of 1789, he had better luck in convincing a sizeable group of middle-class artisans and merchants to buy into the project. But in realizing his success, Barlow painted a fraudulent picture among the recruits of the extent of the existing infrastructure on the site; there was none. He also did not reveal the speculative nature of the venture, presenting the company's ownership of the tract as an absolute when it was actually just an option. Unaware of those deceptions, the prospective settlers bought "titles" to about 150,000 acres, with town lots in the imaginary village being sold to 218 individuals, including Hingston.

However, Barlow was apparently unaware of political events occurring at home. The first Federal Congress met that same summer and agreed to consolidate all foreign debts from the Revolutionary War in the hands new government, under a plan proposed by Alexander

Hamilton, which removed the French notes from Duer's reach. They also balked at the conditions of the proposed sale of land to the Ohio Company, so creating a domino-effect. The Ohio Company could not sell land that it did not own to the Scioto Company, meaning that the titles acquired from Barlow in France were worthless, and the settlers' funds lost. The result was that when those French immigrants arrived in America in May & June 1790, they discovered that they had been defrauded.

Among the first group to reach the United States was Nicholas Hingston. His ship landed in Alexandria, where town residents took the now destitute fraud victims into their care. Duer had attempted to mollify his critics and save the project in the months before their arrival by having a village of four blockhouses and eighty cabins constructed on land in the Ohio Company tract that he did not own; this created a squatter situation when many of those newly-arrived settlers decided to move on to Pittsburgh, where it had been promised that transportation to the site was awaiting them. On reaching the hurriedly-built hamlet – now called Gallipolis – the new residents found log cabins with dirt floors and no crops to sustain them over the coming winter. Along the way, they had their initial encounters with the hostile natives who would assault the village repeatedly before the Treaty of Greeneville secured Euroamerican claims to the Ohio River Valley in 1795.

Most problematic, however, was the recurrence of disease in Gallipolis. While a common event in early frontier settlements, it appears that the urbanized settlers lacked the agrarian skills needed to produce enough food in the village's early years to stave off such outbreaks. Indeed, in their first spring there in 1791, the settlers futilely planted peeled potatoes and canned vegetables believing that they would grow. This is a key point in tracing Hingston's activities, as it is highly unlikely that someone with so extensive a knowledge of horticulture would have allowed his neighbors to pursue such a disastrous course, as they evidently did, if nineteenth-century histories are to be believed. So it looks as if Hingston did not actually take up residence in the village along with the rest of the so-called "French Five Hundred" in late 1790 once he had learned of the deception. Such a deduction is supported by the fact that the obituary published on his death in 1830 reported that he had lived continuously in the District of Columbia from 1790 on.

The entire fiasco led to federal legislation in 1795 that compensated the defrauded settlers by giving clear land-titles to the current inhabitants, and fair market value for any titles that had not been exercised. Hingston was evidently in that later group, as just after the law was enacted, he began advertising the opening of a small nursery business, one selling seeds and fruit trees, in Georgetown newspapers. The appended note stating where those items could be obtained reveals he was the "manager of Mr. I. Mason's stone quarries near George-Town," one of the Maryland quarries providing stone for the public buildings of the new national capital then under construction. While such an unprecedented employment is somewhat surprising, Hingston had plainly become one of the many artisans and builders who were seeking new opportunities in the District, once its site was formally decided in the winter of 1790-91, rather than take his urbane interests to the frontier.

The success of that enterprise persuaded him to enlarge his business in early 1798 at a new location on Fairfax Street in Alexandria. In that notice, Hingston reported he had "practiced

this business in Europe many tears on a large scale" and so "flatters himself with being well acquainted with all its branches." Even so, that publication marked the start of Hingston's practice of not depending on his botanical sales alone for his success; his store would also distribute, at least initially, "foundation Stone from the best quarries on the Potomac," and to facilitate that undertaking he offered his saddle horse in trade for a cart horse; he also wanted to either sell or rent an enslaved man that he then owned, and take on other goods that he could sell in the exchange. Over the next year, Hingston added a line of groceries to his offerings; and by early 1801, he was selling "Queens stone and glass ware" as well.

Still, it was not until 1804 that he once again offered his services as a copperplate-engraver, indicating that he had recognized, in the years since his arrival, that there was very limited demand for such a specialized trade in the District, even as the number of press offices there multiplied with the relocation of the federal government in 1800. Rather, his business became one that was manifestly cyclical, with seeds and other nursery items dominating his advertising in spring and with fine china and dry goods sustaining him the rest of the year. And though no trace of imprints identifiably created by Hingston is seen in the bibliographic record, he very likely produced such for the District's press offices in the era before the War of 1812 as a rewarding ancillary activity.

Hingston evidently remained tied to his English roots throughout his residence in America. He seems to have employed the same seed-suppliers in his homeland that he had before his departure from Paris, even as he cultivated his own stocks on a fifteen-acre farm just west of Alexandria on Cameron Run. (Today the Capital Beltway parallels that feature west of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge.) And in 1806, Hingston married a fellow English émigré, Elizabeth Bloomfield, a sister of the then-popular Romantic poet Robert Bloomfield (1766-1823); she was known in her own right for her literary skills, demonstrating he was a part of the capital region's artistic circles just as he had been in France. That the horticulturist was then fifty-six years-of-age, one gets the impression that he was married previously; but with whom and when, as well as that wife's fate, are mysteries. After Elizabeth died in 1823, Hingston married again, to a woman thirty years his junior; she survived him by just a few months.

The War of 1812 brought an end to Hingston's active advertising. But then he is easily seen, in references to his store in other newspaper notices and the city's property records, that he continued his established business until shortly before his death, at age 81 in 1830. The site of his store on Fairfax Street then was "nearly opposite" the blank-book manufactory of Archibald Douglass (145), though he also owned two lots straddling Hooff Run in what is today the 1700 block of Duke Street; they are described in a 1989 archaeological report as a one-acre lot that had originally been part of an extensive parcel subdivided in the 1790s from the estate of Col. John West, Jr., surveyor of Alexandria's initial town lots – called West End, after him, and from not its west-of-town location. By 1836, all of Hingston's properties had been sold, and his estate settled. After that, his reputation in life was recognized only from his nursery advertising, and not from other adventures, especially the appalling fraud that brought him to Virginia in the first place.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1749 Devonshire, England.
Married [1]: Jan. 26 1806 Elizabeth Bloomfield @ Georgetown, DC (d. 1823)
Married [2]: After 1823 "Jane" (1781-1830), probably in the District.
Died: July 27 1830 Alexandria, Virginia (then District of Columbia).
No record of offspring found.

Sources: MEDSA # 66184, 16578; Janson , *Stranger in America*; Sibley, *The French Five Hundred* (1901); Vance, "French Settlement and Settlers of Gallipolis," (1891), Ryan, "Scioto Company and its Purchase," (1891), Soltow & Soltow, "A Settlement That Failed: The French in Early Gallipolis," (1895), and Wolfe & Wolfe, "Prospects for the Gallipolis Settlement," (1994), all published in the variably-titled journal of the Ohio Historical Society; and published notices in [Georgetown] *Columbian Chronicle* (1795), *Alexandria Times* (1798-1802), *Alexandria Gazette* (1799-1830), and [Washington] *National Intelligencer* (1823-30).