

Leesburg, Capital of the United States

by Wynne C. Saffer

History is sometimes built on hard, cold facts, but often oral history provides undocumented information that forms a more complete picture of a subject or issue. Such is the case concerning exactly where a government agent stored irreplaceable United States government documents in late August 1814, when Washington, D.C. was being burned by the British soldiers during the War of 1812. The debate began as early as 1908 when author James W. Head wrote that the papers were stored in a vault at an estate named Rokeby that is located several miles outside of Leesburg. Another county historian, however, has made the case that the documents were actually stored right in the center of town, in a vacant house on Cornwall Street.

In 1938, Harrison Williams authored a history of Loudoun County titled *Legends of Loudoun*. His work contained few footnotes and no bibliography. One of the legends included in the book addressed the controversy and included the following:

Stephen Pleasanton, then a clerk in the State Department, was placed in charge of their removal. He caused to be made a large number of linen bags in which were placed the government's books and documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the

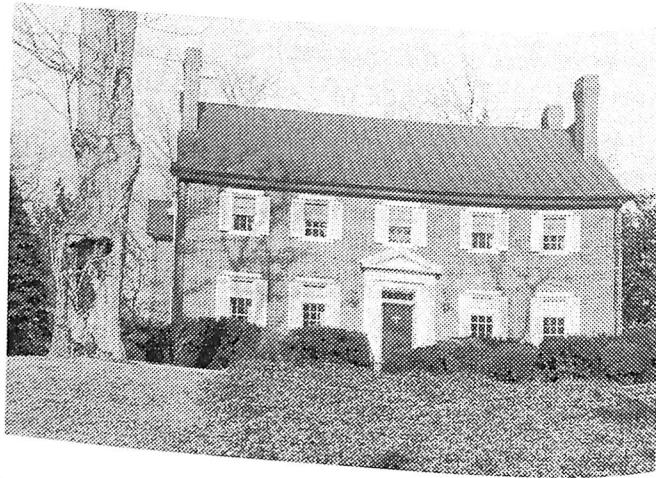
Wynne C. Saffer is a lifelong resident of Loudoun County. He graduated from Wake Forest University in 1971 and worked for more than 25 years as a state auditor. He has authored two books on local history—Mount Zion Cemetery, Aldie Virginia (1997) and Loudoun Votes, 1867-1966, A Civil War Legacy (2002).

Constitution...the caravan continued to Leesburg, where the sacks were placed for one night in the courthouse, according to some writers or, on the authority of others, in a vacant building in the town, the key of which was given to a certain Rev. Mr. Littlejohn, a young clergyman then recently ordained. The next day the sacks were again placed in the wagons and driven to the nearby plantation of Rokeby where in its vaults they were stored for two weeks until it was safe to return them to Washington.¹

Williams' book also states, incorrectly, that President Madison spent this period at Belmont, the Loudoun home of Ludwell Lee, when in fact there is firm evidence that the president stayed at Salona in Fairfax County. To make matters even more confusing, Dolly Madison stayed at another home in Fairfax County, which was also named Rokeby.

Rokeby, the house where legend has it that the valuable government documents were stored during the burning of Washington, D.C.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Balch Library.



Parts of this story were reinforced in 1992 when Kathryn Coughlan, who had lived at Rokeby, published a booklet titled *Rokeby, A Page in History*. Ms. Coughlan, who was a member of the Loudoun Historical Society, and spoke at a meeting of the society members in 1999 about the Binns family and Rokeby, included the following account in her book:

1. Harrison Williams, *Legends of Loudoun*, (Richmond: Garrett & Massie, 1938), pp. 180-181.

He [Pleasanton] procured wagons from the neighboring farmers, loaded the documents into the wagons from the carts and proceeded to Leesburg, 35 miles away, "at which place an empty house [Rokeby] was procured in which the papers were safely placed, the doors locked, and the keys given to Reverend Littlejohn...."

A description of the removal of the books and papers of the Department of State was related by a letter from S. Pleasanton to William H. Winder, Esquire, a General and Commanding Officer, dated August 7, 1848, Washington City, 34 years after the incident....

Finally, during the Bicentennial, the National Archives recognized Rokeby as the place that housed the Declaration of Independence during the War of 1812. Along with the Declaration of Independence, further research has proven that the Constitution of the United States, the Articles of Confederation, the correspondence of General Washington, the secret journals of Congress, and other records and valuable papers were also stored in the vault at Rokeby.²

The only source of documentation offered by Ms. Coughlan was a letter written in 1848 by Stephen Pleasanton to Gen. William H. Winder.³ Obviously, any account written 30-years after the event may contain errors or omissions due to the passage of time. The sections of Pleasanton's letter that relate to Leesburg are quoted below:

I proceeded to some farm houses in Virginia, and procured wagons, in which the books and papers were deposited, and I proceeded with them to the town of Leesburg, a distance of 35 miles, at which place an empty house was procured, in which the papers were safely placed, the doors locked, and the keys given to the

2. Kathryn L. Coughlan, *Rokeby, A Page in History*, (privately printed, 1992), pp.25-28.

3. According to Robert F. O'Neill, Jr., author of *The Cavalry Battles of Aldie, Middleburg and Upperville*, Stephen Pleasanton was the father of General Alfred Pleasanton who commanded the Union cavalry in the battles of Aldie, Middleburg and Upperville in 1863.

Rev. Mr. Littlejohn, who was then, or had been, one of the collectors of internal revenue....

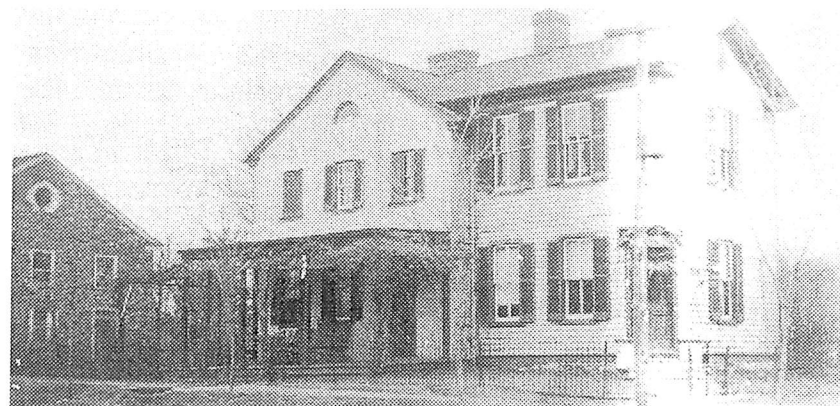
Being fatigued with the ride, and securing the papers, I retired early to bed, and was informed next morning by the people of the hotel where I staid, that they had seen, the proceeding night, being the 24th of August, a large fire in the direction of Washington, which proved to be a light from the public buildings the enemy had set on fire, and burned them to the ground...It was not considered safe to bring the papers of the State Department back for some weeks, not, indeed, until the British fleet generally had left the waters of the Chesapeake. In the meantime it was found necessary for me to proceed to Leesburg occasionally, for particular papers, to which the Secretary of State [James Monroe] had occasion to refer in the course of his correspondence.⁴

Pleasanton's letter makes no reference to Rokeby or Binns, but it does name Leesburg and mentions giving the key to Rev. [John] Littlejohn, who at the time was the minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church, located on Cornwall Street in Leesburg.⁵ Littlejohn probably lived in the parsonage, which was owned at the time by Samuel and Betsey Murray, and was located near the church on Cornwall Street.⁶ Although Pleasanton refers to an empty house, which Ms. Coughlan identified as Rokeby, Harrison Williams wrote that the records were stored in a vacant building in Leesburg and moved the next day to Rokeby. However, Pleasanton makes no mention of moving the records after they were deposited in the empty house, only that he returned to it several times to obtain various papers. Therefore, why do both Coughlan and Harrison identify Rokeby as the

4. Pleasanton to Winder, August 7, 1848, quoted in Edward D. Ingraham, *A Sketch of the Events which preceded the Capture of Washington by the British on the twenty-fourth of August 1814*, (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1849), pp. 48-49.
5. *The First Methodist Deed in America*, by Melvin Lee Steadman, Jr., pp.27-29, Thomas Balch Library's church files.
6. Samuel and Betsey Murrey sold lot no. 49 at the corner of Cornwall and Back streets to the Methodist Church trustees in 1816; Loudoun County Deed Book 2T, p.333.

location of the records? Apparently, both were swayed in their opinions by the oral history of the events.

As with most stories passed down through generations, the Rokeby connection may have been the result of one family's ownership of two very different properties. In 1815, Charles Binns, Jr. purchased a house located on Cornwall Street in Leesburg from Charles Fenton Mercer.⁷



The house at 102 W. Cornwall Street in Leesburg, where Reverend John Littlejohn lived. The old stone Methodist Church is in the background. The house that Charles Binns, Jr. purchased in 1815 stood across Cornwall Street.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Balch Library.

Binns' brother also owned Rokeby. Whether Rokeby was vacant in 1814 is not known. According to a census for that period, Charles's brother, Simon, was living there in 1810.⁸ His other brother, William A. Binns (who inherited the property from his father in 1801), was in residence at Rokeby in 1820.⁹ It seems unlikely that a large house on 200 acres would be empty.

An alternative theory for the site of the stored documents suggests that the empty house Pleasanton used was one purchased by Charles Fenton Mercer in 1809.¹⁰ That house was located at the corner of

7. Loudoun County Deed Book 2S, p. 492, recorded July 22, 1815.
8. 1810 United States Census for Loudoun County, Virginia, p. 298, line 2.
9. 1820 United States Census for Loudoun County, Virginia, p. 153, line 81.
10. *Washington Post, Loudoun Extra*, August 18, 2002, article by Eugene Scheel, "In Debate About Document's Hiding Place, A Loudoun Legend Lives On." Scheel quotes county historian Ned Douglass' explanation for the documents' resting-place. Loudoun County Deed Book 2L, page 346, recorded sale from James Saunders to Mercer on January 8, 1810.

Cornwall and Wirt streets, across from the parsonage where Littlejohn lived. In 1810, Mercer had been elected to the Virginia legislature and was a colonel of the Virginia militia. At the time of the burning of the capital, he was in Richmond recovering from an illness¹¹ and, since he was a bachelor, his house would have been vacant. Having traveled for hours from the capital, the vacant home of a Virginia legislator and militia colonel would have been a desirable location for the storage of the country's most valuable papers. The question becomes why would Pleasanton travel two miles further into the country to store the documents. And why would he entrust them to a house on a deserted estate outside the town?

In 1975, Rokeby was added to the Virginia Landmarks Register based on various criteria.¹² The listing accompanying the designation includes the statement, "Rokeby is *reputedly* the place where the Declaration of Independence and other important documents were stored in 1814."

Stephen Pleasanton's 1848 letter does support that Leesburg was the destination for the government documents. Therefore, Leesburgers may still claim that their town was the capital for two weeks, if possession of such prestigious documents determines the location of the nation's capital.



The Methodist Church building, at which Rev. Littlejohn was a pastor, is no longer standing. A historical marker on Cornwall Street points out that it was one of the first church-owned properties in the United States. The church's cemetery remains next to the site of the original church where it is enclosed by a wrought iron fence. The

Leesburg house that Charles Binns purchased from Charles Fenton Mercer is no longer standing; however, the parsonage, located at 102 Cornwall, remains and is currently a private residence. Privately owned, Rokeby is still one of the most beautiful estates in Loudoun County.



Courtesy of Thomas Balch Library

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|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Robert Hamilton 50 | John Magrath 49 17-21 2-7-33 | Reveries Everage 48 | John Miller 47 | John Minor 46 | John Minor 45 | John Harryman 44 1-87 | John Lockhart 43 4-1-33 |
| CORNWALL | | | | | | | |
| 2-147 | 2-1-17 2-4-290 | Robert Hamilton 3-1-327 | Margaret Naper 3-4 | Daniel Davis 1-3-488 36 | Levon Powell 3-4-175 | William Faulk 3-4-327 | John 3-4-327 |
| 51 | 52 | 34 | 35 | 33 1-47 | 37 | 38 | 39 |
| Bernard Wren 2-1-173 | John Negummes 2-1-173 | Peter Gage 2-1-173 | Michael Staker 1-1-173 2-1-173 | David Miller 1-1-173 2-1-173 | County | 28 | 29 |
| 53 | 54 | 31 | 32 | 2-1-173 29 | 27 | 28 | 29 |
| MARKET | | | | | | | |

Map of the original town lots in Leesburg by Charles O. Vandevanter. Lot no. 49 was purchased in 1816 by the Methodist Episcopal Church for a rectory. Lot no. 52 was sold by Charles Fenton Mercer to Charles Binns, Jr. in 1815, where the government documents were likely stored. The hotel where Pleasanton stayed was probably within a block of the courthouse (lots 27 and 28).

Courtesy of Thomas Balch Library

11. Douglas R. Egerton, *Charles Fenton Mercer and the Trial of National Conservatism*, (University Press of Mississippi, 1989), p.93.
12. Calder Loth, editor, *The Virginia Landmarks Register*, (University Press of Virginia, 1986), p. 245.