

**Patrick Cavan: "Missing Trustee of the Town of
Leesburg"**

By Stanley K. Contrades

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Main Body of the Article

It takes involved citizens to build a new country. The same goes for the towns and counties. Leesburg and Loudoun County were no different in the 1700s, a very formative period for our new country.

Patrick Cavan, who lived in Leesburg, Virginia, in the latter half of the 1700s, was a businessman and public figure of import and helped build both Leesburg and Loudoun County into what it is today. Yet for someone who helped shape a new county for the better part of three decades, little of him is widely

known. So little, as a matter of fact, that it is unknown where he is buried.

While many gaps in his life story exist, a wide variety of information is available to piece together a colorful portrait of this important local businessman and community leader. The volume and diverse nature of the information, however, is akin to being “a mile wide, but only an inch deep.”

Cavan was active in a variety of political, legal, business and public works at this broad range of activities aids in developing an overall picture of the man as he matured from a “young” businessman in what was likely his early to mid-20s in the 1770s, to an older, established member of the community during a very dynamic period (from the Revolution to about 1800).

Any look at Cavan brings a very basic challenge from the start. As with many people of the era, Cavan’s last name may be found with several different spellings; seven different versions were found while researching him for this article. An Anglicized version of the Gaelic ‘O Caomhain (son of Kevin)¹ the name Cavan, ending with an “-an,” turned out to be the most common version and chosen as best representative of the man. An example of the challenges encountered while researching Cavan was when one hand-written document contained Cavan’s name spelled two different ways on the same page and by the same scribe!

¹ Hanks, Patrick, ed. *Dictionary of American Family Names, Volume 1, A-F*. Oxford University Press, New York. 2003, pg. 306.

Cavan was likely born about the time Loudoun County and Leesburg were established; they essentially grew up together. The Town of Leesburg was established in 1758 and had few structures or residents. While birth records for Cavan were not found, available information suggests he may have been born between 1750-55. This was determined by taking how 24-year-old Nicholas Cresswell, a diarist who knew Cavan from 1774-1777, described Cavan as a "young man"² in 1775 (suggesting 20-25 years of age). His year of death appears to be 1802 based on an 1802 land auction and court records from February 1803 hinting Cavan died intestate. Considering these pieces of information together results in Cavan being in his late 40s or early 50s when he died and tracks with the average age at death of a male in the 1700s being roughly 40-50 years old.³ Leesburg's continued development during and after the Revolution came at an opportune time for Cavan to develop as a businessman and community leader.

Mindful of the "...inch deep..." nature of potential references, no resource was discounted as Cavan tended to appear in seemingly unconnected activities (almost all with a paucity of details). Sources included the obvious such as birth and death listings, deed records, and marriage registrations, with only one source providing any depth of information. Some sources had only one or two sentences mentioning Cavan or referred to him in a side note. While many of these small pieces of the story puzzle were

² MacVeagh, Lincoln. *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell 1774-1777*. The Dial Press, Inc., New York, 1924, pg132.

³ Volo, James and Dorothy. *Family Life in 17th and 18th Century America*. Greenwood. Westport, CT., 2005.

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contained in secondary sources, they often contained references to a primary source and thus another lead.

The one source providing depth of information was a journal kept by Nicholas Cresswell, an Englishman who arrived in the colonies when he was 24-years old and traveled the Virginia area on and off from 1774-1777. The journal was key to providing a snapshot of Cavan's day-to-day life and, for the first time, his age. During his various journeys Cresswell met and befriended Cavan, eventually considering him his best friend. He mentions Cavan 34 times and while most of those journal entries are brief (e.g., sharing a meal), they mention several activities involving Cavan.

From this single journal was discovered: The earliest mention of Cavan owning a "store,"⁴ that he was a Tory and likely did not support the Revolution (neither did Cresswell); that Cavan may have had a Quaker connection and was a teetotaler, that Cavan may have known the ancestors of John J. Janney (author of a story about life in early 19th century Loudoun County), and that Cavan had some skill as a pugilist (he went to the aid of Cresswell and another man being assaulted by a group of men). These insights on Cavan, although brief, are varied and not found elsewhere. While other useful resources seem disjointed (e.g., guardian listings, auction house records), they provide unique pieces to help put together the colorful puzzle that is Cavan's life.

Aiding Cavan in his various successes was the availability of relatively inexpensive land in and

⁴ MacVeagh, Lincoln. *The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell 1774-1777*. The Dial Press, Inc., New York, 1924, pg139.

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around Leesburg. For example, in the 1750s Nicholas Minor initially sold ½ acre plots of land in the town of Leesburg for £3 (or three pounds sterling). Outlying parcels of land for farming could go for less and may explain why many small farms were started and homes built at the time.

Is a £3 piece of land expensive or relatively cheap? During Cavan's time a farmer might make about £10 a year, skilled craftsmen £30-100, and a wealthy plantation owner about £1,000 a year. But what about the buying power of that money? A lower end skilled craftsman making £30 a year would be making about 1 shilling (written "s"), or 12 pence, a day. At the time, flour would cost him about 2 pence per pound and butter about 4 pence per pound, with a handsaw running about 6 pence or half a day's pay. But that is only part of a complex application and is where a vignette helps with understanding relative worth: What is considered a necessity, or a luxury today was different in the mid-1700s. Lumber and semi-skilled labor in the colonies was plentiful at the time and as a result, one could buy, for example, a bedstead for about 8s. But the bedsheets, a finished textile not allowed to be manufactured in the colonies and a luxury only available by trade with England, would cost 50s, or £2.10s,⁵ a sizeable portion of a farmer's annual earnings!

According to Leesburg's government history, its Revolutionary War era population was probably about 500 residents.⁶ It is possible a local businessman like Cavan, someone likely to have some education and

⁵ <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/1646>.

⁶ <http://www.leesburgva.gov/visitors/history-of-leesburg/early-settlement-and-founding>.

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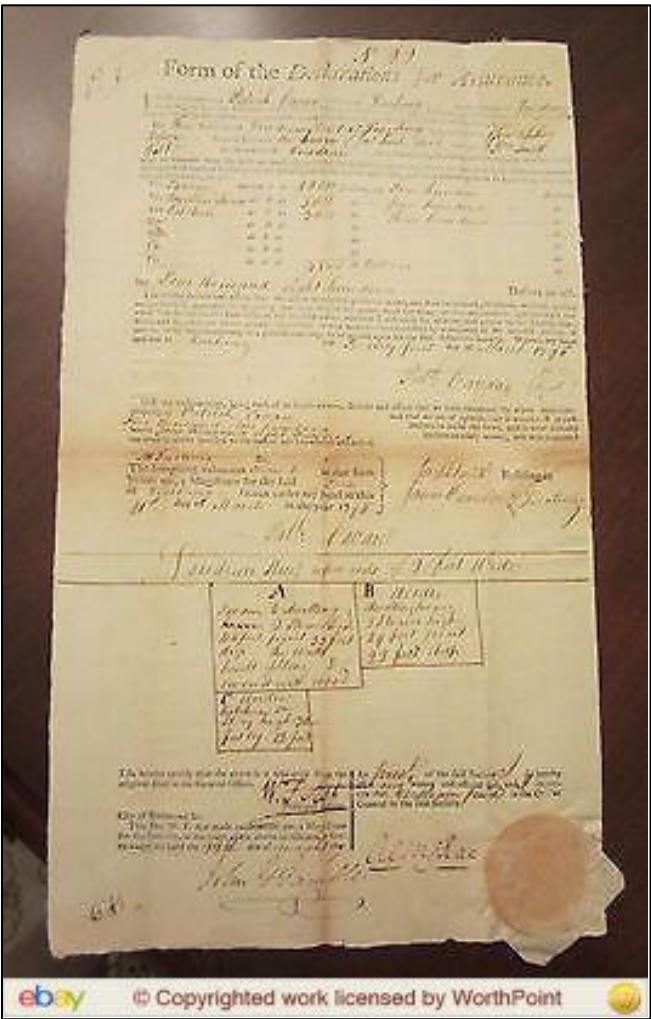
experience handling money, and at least some legal knowledge, would stand out in such a small population. As a result, it is well within reason Cavan, even at a young age, would be involved in private and government business dealings, even politics. In this instance, his involvements led to a cascading effect; residents turned to Cavan to perform actions such as being the executor of their wills, magistrates appointed him as guardian to minors, and Cavan received contracts to accomplish public works such as building jails and road improvements. As did many of his contemporaries, Cavan provided for his livelihood through a variety of activities.

Cavan was very involved in Leesburg law, business, public works, and business. He owned a store from the mid '70s (and at a relatively young age); the store, according to the *Leesburg District Survey Files Addresses*, was probably a tavern on Loudoun Street near the center of town (Loudoun St, SE, 7 (Block 25)). Contemporary confirmation of the tavern is provided in *18th-Century Loudoun County Jails and Prison Bounds* when stating Cavan built a county jail; "The jail was likely located near the market house, which may have been constructed at this time in the northwest corner of lot 28. In 1807, funds were paid by the county for hauling dirt to *fill up between the goal and Market house*. Patrick Cavan, who built the jail, owned a tavern on lot 6 in 1797."

A partly printed 1796 insurance document (and "plat"), an "Assurance of Property",⁷ once available on eBay and completed in manuscript, describes where a

⁷ <http://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/loudoun-county-virginia-leesburg-536329478>.

tavern and associated buildings were located on Loudoun Street in Leesburg. The handwritten name of the resident is a Patrick Cavan and shows where the tavern (A), an attached dwelling (B), and a kitchen (C) are located.



1796 "Assurance" document

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Patrick Cavan residing at Leesburg -
 Assurance in the Mutual Assurance Society against Fire on Build-
 ings, 1795, agreeable to the several acts of the General Assembly
 on Loudoun Street at Leesburg now oc-
 cupied between the House of Jas. Kirk decd
 the county of Loudoun their dimensions, situa-
 tion, the walls are built of, and what the buildings are covered with, &
 the things on the plat, signed by me and the appraisers, and each val-
 ued and marked A at 4000 Dollars, say Four thou-
 sand do B at 500 do - five hundred
 do C at 300 do - three hundred

Patrick Cavan listed as "resident" on the document.

in the year 1798

Patrick Cavan

Loudoun Street upwards of 20 feet 11

A	B
Tavern & dwelling 2 stories high 29 feet front 33 feet deep, the walls built of stone & covered with wood	Wooden dwelling house 2 stories high 29 feet front 22 feet deep
C Wooden kitchen on story high 32 feet 12 1/2	

Tavern(A), Dwelling(B), and a kitchen(C) depicted on the document

Cavan may have been a Quaker or at least familiar enough to them to accompany Cresswell to one of their meetings. It is not known if his association with Quakers was responsible for possible teetotaler tendencies, but Creswell made a particular note of the one and only time he observed Cavan drink. An interesting note considering Cavan owned a tavern.

Evidence of Cavan's involvement in local legal proceedings may be found in the 1780s with seven mentions in the *Loudoun County Guardian Papers* of Cavan being appointed as guardian to various individuals and even eighteen mentions of Cavan acting as an executor, or in similar capacity, to handle estates. It is in the '80s that Cavan is first recorded as being involved in executing public works such road and county building improvements and building two town jails.

Not all these involvements went smoothly as evidenced by records indicating Cavan had to sue the sheriff, George Summers, in 1788 to be paid for work accomplished on the county courthouse.⁸

This period of Cavan's life also has its darker side with archives indicating he was not averse to processes involving enslaved persons as he likely dealt in arranging their transfer or sale while executing wills. According to the *Loudoun County Virginia Will Book Abstracts* (Books A-Z, Dec 1757 - Jun 1841), Cavan was appointed an executor for the estate of Matthew Campbell;

⁸ *Loudoun County Miscellaneous Papers Index*, 201505201325257739.

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“Will Exor: CAMPBELL, Matthew, 1782-3, sell slaves, (w James KIRK, £6,000 bond)”.

Cavan may have also arranged for the use of slave labor in some of his public works. A 1790 record indicates Cavan may have personally held at least one indentured servant;

M: 206 12 July 1790; Richard Douiphan (Donivan) a servant of Patrick “Caven,” discharged from indenture, it having expired.⁹

The high point of the ‘80s, and possibly his business and political life, is when Cavan is appointed a Trustee for the Town of Leesburg in 1787. While it is not known when he vacated the office, serving as a trustee is a position of considerable influence as the town was not yet incorporated and thus did not hold elections for town officials. At the same time, John Littlejohn is also appointed a trustee for Leesburg. Littlejohn will come up at least twice more in close connection to Cavan.

⁹ Hutchison, Luisa Skinner. *Poor Children, and Bastards, Loudoun County, Virginia, 1757 – 1850*. Willow Bend Books, Westminster, Maryland, 2000, Pg. 50.

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600

LAWS OF VIRGINIA,

CHAP. LX.

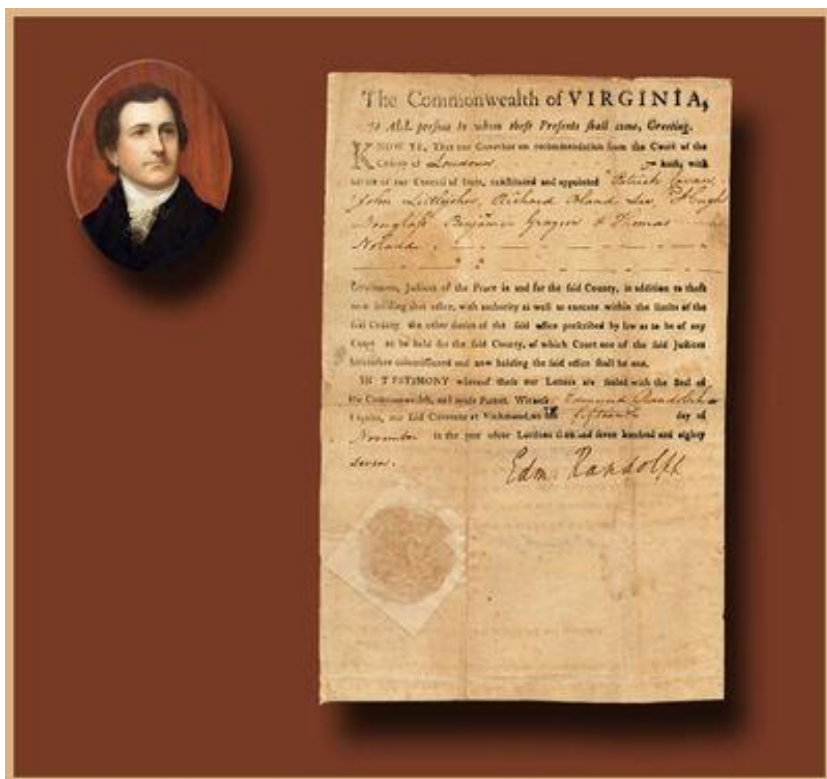
*An act appointing trustees for the
town of Leesburg in the county of
Loudon.*

[Passed November 20, 1787.]

**Trustees of
Leesburg ap-
pointed.** **I. BE it enacted by the General Assembly, That**
John Hough, Israel Thompson, James M'Ilheny,
Joshua Daniel, John Littlejohn, Patrick Cavan, and
Samuel Murray, gentlemen, are hereby constituted
trustees of the town of Leesburg, in the county of
Loudon, and they, or a majority of them, are empow-
ered to settle and determine all disputes concerning the
bounds of the lots in the said town, and to establish
such rules and orders, for the regular building of
houses thereon, as they may judge most proper. In

*Hening, William Waller. The Statutes at Large: Being a
Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, From the First session of
the Legislature, in the year 1619, Vol. 12, Chapter LX.
Richmond. 1823*

Cavan is so well recognized in the local area and by state officials that just five days prior to being named a town trustee, he is appointed a justice of the peace by the governor of Virginia. Likely not by coincidence, John Littlejohn is also made a magistrate by the same appointment.



Appointment document indicating Edmund Randolph, Governor of Virginia in 1787, appoints six Justices of the Peace, Patrick Cavan and John Littlejohn among them (*University Archives*)¹⁰

The 1790s was just as active as the '80s as Cavan is recorded almost 60 times in the Deeds listing for various reasons concerning property. Records show Cavan is still serving as a magistrate a dozen years

¹⁰ https://www.vialibri.net/cgi-bin/book_search.php?refer=start&sv=fHx8fBhdHJpY2srQ2F2YW58fHx8&wt=20&fr=s&sort=yr&order=asc&lang=en&act=quick&hi_lo=lo&curr=USD&y=6906.

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after his appointment as evidenced by the excerpt below:

No. I.—‘ We, the subscribers, magistrates for
‘ the county of Loudoun, being called on by one
‘ of the constables for the said county, to examine
‘ a person by him apprehended, on suspicion of
‘ having eloped from the *wheelbarrow*, on the
‘ Baltimore roads, who, on his examination, denied
‘ being a runaway—said his name was *James T.*
‘ *Callender*, lately from Philadelphia, printer of a
‘ paper published in that city; that he came from
‘ thence into this state (Virginia) at the particular
‘ request of General Mason, at whose house he
‘ then resided; that his papers were at General
‘ Mason’s, and that he (General Mason) would
‘ give any satisfaction that might be required re-
‘ specting his character.

‘ PAT’K CAVAN.
‘ JOSEPH SMITH.

‘ *Loudoun ss&f.*

‘ The above certificate was sworn to, this 13th
‘ day of August, 1798, before

‘ SAMUEL MURRAY.’

Wertz, Mary A. *Marriages of Loudoun County, Virginia, 1757-1853*, and Loudoun County Marriages 1760-1850, John Vogt & T. William Kethly, Jr, Iberian Pub Co., Athens, Georgia, 1985

While males of his age during the Revolution were reportedly required to be in the militia, there was no record found of Cavan serving until the 1790s, not surprising as Cresswell clearly notes Cavan had Tory leanings and was not supportive of the Revolution. Which may help explain how Cavan earned the dubious distinction of tying the record for being assessed fines for failing to appear for required militia drills!

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In other parts of his private life Cavan is recorded as marrying Sarah Baker (age unknown) in 1798 by John Littlejohn, who in addition to being a town trustee and justice of the peace, also appears to have been a Methodist Minister. Another example of people at the time making their living through a variety of activities! Cavan is estimated to have been close to 50 years of age when he was married and no record of them having children could be found. No records were found to show Cavan had been married previously and nothing could be found to explain why he married late in life. About a dozen years after Cavan passed, there is evidence that Sarah remarried in 1814 to a William Yates.

While no direct evidence of Cavan's passing, like a death certificate, was discovered, a 1954 Presbyterian Church directory mentions the land for the church was purchased at auction in November 1802, with the deed being transferred from a Patrick Cavan.

The Establishment of The Leesburg Presbyterian Church

The years during and following the Revolution saw great poverty among the people in this area. So it is a tribute to their faith and consecration and determination that by 1802 the members of The Presbyterian Society could plan to build a church. It seems to indicate that they were people of substance, probably aided by a certain amount of Scotch thrift. The Society bought at public auction on Nov. 9, 1802 the lot where the church now stands, one half acre for \$80. The deed conveyed the property from Patrick Cavan to Robert Wade, Edward Dorsey, John McCormick and Alexander Lawrence, representing The Presbyterian Church of Leesburg "for the sole use and purpose of a burying ground and place of worship to be conducted agreeably to the manner prescribed by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of these United States, forever." It is an interesting coincidence that the property on which the Catoctin Church stood when the congregation bought it in 1769 was purchased from John Cavan, whom we have reason to believe was the father of Patrick Cavan. After the

Directory of the Presbyterian Congregation at Leesburg, Virginia.
May 2, 1954

When the mention of the auction is taken together with February 1803 legal documents mentioning Cavan was deceased and died intestate,¹¹ it appears Cavan died late in 1802 and may have done so unexpectedly. The mention that church land had probably been purchased from Cavan's father could lead one to believe that Cavan came from a family of at least some means and explains how Cavan owned a store or tavern at a relatively young age.

No record or other documents have yet come to light indicating where Patrick Cavan was buried. As a result, it is not possible to visit the final resting place

¹¹ Duncan, Patricia B. *Index to Loudoun County, Virginia, Land Deed Books 2A-2M, 1800-1810*. Willow Bend Books, Westminster, Maryland, 2002, Pg. 52 and Pg. 56.

of a person who played such a vital and active role in developing Leesburg and Loudoun County into what they are today. And thus, the life, and colorful story puzzle, of Patrick Cavan, established businessman, Trustee for the Town of Leesburg, and Loudoun County Justice of the Peace, comes to an end.

This article draws from a research paper by the author while completing Northern Virginia Community College's Public History and Historic Preservation Certificate Program.

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*Loudoun County Combined Map Index – Alpha by
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Thomas Balch Library.

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Samuel Gardner Timeline. Family Search, 2015

Source:

<https://familysearch.org/photos/stories/12588896> .

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Map List

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About the Author:

Stan Contrades has embraced his new home state of Virginia and writes about historical subjects, specializing in historical flags. He is a retired U.S. Air Force colonel and a senior analyst with a private company in Alexandria, Virginia. Returning to academic studies after retiring from the USAF, he completed Northern Virginia Community College's (NOVA's) certificate program in Public History and Historic Preservation at the Loudoun campus. This article is an outgrowth of an assignment completed during the program.

He has written for the U.S. Coast Guard's Historian's Office (*The Long Blue Line*) and the North American Vexillology Association (NAVA) (*NAVA News* and *Vexillum*). He has presented papers at the U.S. Naval Academy's McMullen Naval History Symposium and a NAVA Annual Meeting (NAVA 57). He has been a volunteer collections manager with the Coast Guard's Heritage Asset Collection since 2014 and for the past ten years has designed and installed exhibits at the Pendleton County Historical Museum in his wife's hometown of Franklin, West Virginia. He is an

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executive board member of the Prince William Historic Preservation Foundation and serves on NOVA's Public History and Historic Preservation Advisory Board and as NAVA's Second Vice President (President-elect, 2023-24).