

## ***Reconsidering the Namesake: Thomas Nelson Jr., the rise of Yorktown, and the challenges of acknowledging an inclusive history***

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The College's namesake, Thomas Nelson, Jr. was born into a privileged gentry family that traces its history back to King Henry III of England, holds a distant connection to King Charles II, King of England, Ireland, and Scotland, and boasts a more direct lineage to Donald O'Neill, Prince of Ulster, Ireland.<sup>1</sup> "Scotch Tom" Nelson, (1677-1747) an immigrant from Penrith, Cumberland to the Virginia Colony in 1696, at age 19, settled in the emerging port town of Yorktown, Virginia. Only organized in 1634 by the Virginia Assembly as one of 8 shires, or counties, in Virginia, the Charles River Shire, later renamed York County for James, Duke of York, became a leading anchorage of colonial Virginia and a center of trade for both tobacco and enslaved Africans. By 1691, the Virginia General Assembly declared Yorktown as the official port of entry for the colonial capital of Williamsburg.

Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the era that "Scotch Tom" Nelson, Thomas Nelson, Jr.'s grandfather, arrived in Virginia, the practice of indentured servitude, which released laborers from contracts after approximately seven years, waned and resulted in the importation of enslaved Africans. The number of these laborers, who would unwillingly serve in perpetuity, dramatically increased as European demand for the colony's labor-intensive tobacco crops swelled. Unfree Africans would compose the primary agricultural labor force in Virginia for the next 200 years following this terrible transformation from the reliance on indentured servitude (in which both Black and white laborers participated) to race-based chattel slavery, reserved exclusively for those of African descent.

The tremendous need for additional laborers in coastal Virginia can be wholly attributed to the unique geography of the Tidewater coupled with the changing tastes of English consumers. Geographer David S. Hardin attributes the cultivation of a sweet-smelling strain of tobacco called the York Leaf to the rich alluvial soil around the York River and other similar river terraces. So dependent on precise growing conditions, the luxury tobacco could only be produced on fourteen percent of land in the Tidewater and it commanded a price "five times more than the bitter Orinoco strain," said former Colonial Williamsburg historian, Taylor Stoermer. The expensive, and highly profitable, strain of tobacco allowed Virginia's elite planters to "invest in expensive black slaves rather than cheaper but increasingly scarce white indentured servants."<sup>2</sup>

Between 1698 to 1750, three generations of Nelsons – "Scotch Tom", William, and Thomas, Jr. – created, owned, and ran the most profitable mercantile business in Yorktown. These three men saw Yorktown rise to become the biggest and busiest slave market in the first half of 18<sup>th</sup> century Virginia where approximately 50,000 enslaved Africans from approximately

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.genealogy.com/forum/surnames/topics/nelson/10932/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dailypress.com/history/dp-nws-cradle-of-slavery-20130509-post.html>

163 ships were landed and sold.<sup>3</sup> While more than 70 percent of Africans who were imported into Virginia were offloaded on the shores of the York and Rappahannock rivers,"<sup>4</sup> most of these enslaved Africans were sold from the port of Yorktown "by such prominent businessmen as 'Scotch Tom' Nelson in sales so frequent and large that they [Tidewater planters] consumed more than two-thirds of all the blacks brought to Virginia."<sup>5</sup> Historian Edward Ayres, then working at the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation noted, "It was the elites who figured out slavery first — and they had the wealth to afford it before anyone else but by the time of the Revolution, it had penetrated down so far that half of the households in York County owned slaves."<sup>6</sup> By the 1750s, the use of enslaved people dominated labor in the area, "You would have seen slaves working in the houses and taverns. You would have seen them working on the docks and in the fields. They would have been almost everywhere you looked — and in numbers you wouldn't have found in most other places."<sup>7</sup>

"Scotch Tom" Nelson, a first-generation Virginian, became a wealthy planter, merchant, gentleman jurist, and port landing trustee in the up and coming town of Yorktown. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, he was the leading property owner in the bustling port town.<sup>8</sup> Yorktown, by 1730, had developed into a refined and comfortable world and was characterized by a visiting Englishman as having, "a great air of opulence amongst the inhabitants... every considerable man keeps an equipage... very pretty garden spots... avenues... are prodigiously agreeable. The roads are infinitely superior to most in England... and the planters live in a manner equal to men of the best fortune."<sup>9</sup> "Scotch Tom" Nelson's wealth is demonstrated by his will which, upon his death, provided his wife, "all those pieces of Gold, Rings, and Jewells whereof she is now possessed. And it is also my will and desire that she have during her natural life the use of my Dwelling-House, Kitchens, Gardens, on the same side of the street with the house, stable, chariot, and chariot Horses, and of all the Furniture at my said house and Kitchens and my Town Cows." In addition to jewelry and use of property, "Scotch Tom" also specifically decreed that his wife would have "the service of my negroes Grace, Penny, Suckey, Frank, Will, Cesar, Tryal, and Little Davy during her life." Following her death, "Scotch Tom" directed to, "give the said furniture, chariot, horses, cows, and Negroes to my son, William Nelson."<sup>10</sup> By the mid-1700s, this inheritance practice of entailing enslaved people along with all other property, rather than a probate court dividing property (including slaves) evenly, by gentry elite was commonplace. This convention, appropriated from slave owners in another English colony,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://slavevoyages.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://wydaily.com/local-news-old/2013/05/27/first-in-nation-yorktown-marker-to-serve-as-reminder-of-slave-trades-grim-legacy/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dailypress.com/tidewater-review/dp-nws-black-history-primer-yorktown-20150222-story.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dailypress.com/tidewater-review/dp-nws-black-history-primer-yorktown-20150222-story.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dailypress.com/life/dp-nws-york-river-slavery-0526-20130525-story.html>

<sup>8</sup> Richter, Julie Caroline Julia, "In Pursuit of Urban Property: Lot holders in Colonial Yorktown and Williamsburg" (1989). Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects. Paper 1539625542. <https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-11gw-js43>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.visitorktown.org/214/Yorktown-History>

<sup>10</sup> *Berkeley Manuscripts*, The William and Mary Quarterly, Jan., 1898, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Jan., 1898), pp. 135- 152

Barbados, was obviously constructed for the benefit of the gentry class and further contributed to the capriciousness and chaos of an enslaved person's life.<sup>11</sup>

William Nelson (1711-1772), father of our college namesake, as firstborn son, received the bulk of his father's estate. William took possession of a thriving mercantile business on the York River, inherited a mill, waterfront warehouse, a store, property in Yorktown, agricultural lands and a ship, *The Nelson*, which made regular trips exporting prized York River tobacco and importing "sundry European goods" from across the Atlantic. As published by the newspaper of record for the colony, *The Virginia Gazette*, William continued to act as an agent, perhaps on a smaller scale than his father given the decreased number of advertisements, and sold enslaved Africans from the port of Yorktown.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, William served on the York County Court and, upon "Scotch Tom's" death, succeeded his father on the Governor's Council with eleven of the most influential gentry men in Virginia. Eventually, William would become president of that body charged with advising the royal governor and had the additional responsibility of serving in the General Assembly's upper house. The importance of familial relationships, which resulted in the protection and promotion of power in Virginia's early systems of government, cannot be understated; between 1720 and 1776, about half of the members of the House of Burgesses were related by blood.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Nelson, Jr. (1738-1789), son of William and the man for whom the College is named, benefitted tremendously from the wealth, privilege, and position of his family, situated at the top of the colony's rigid social structure in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Virginia, by 1770 had a population of about 450,000 people and approximately five percent of that population comprised the ruling gentry class. From about 21 prominent families who married, worked, and socialized together, men from the "topping people" dominated not only the economy of Virginia, but royal and colonial governments as well.<sup>14</sup> To prepare Nelson for his participation in this oligarchy, he was educated in England, first at Newcome's School in Hackney, a trendy private school patronized largely by Whig parents, and then attending Christ's College at Cambridge University and graduating in 1760.<sup>15</sup> A year later, while on the voyage home to Virginia, his father secured Nelson a seat on the House of Burgesses, Virginia's first legislative body, amongst his fellow gentry elite in the colony.

Upon his return to British North America, in addition to governmental service to the colony, Thomas Nelson, Jr. assumed the responsibility of overseeing operations on several of

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<sup>11</sup> Walsh, Lorena S. "The Chesapeake Slave Trade: Regional Patterns, African Origins, and Some Implications": *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Jan., 2001, Vol. 58, No. 1, *New Perspectives on the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Jan., 2001), pp. 157.

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<sup>13</sup> Jack Greene, "Foundations of Power in the Virginia House of Burgesses, 1720-1776," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 16 (1959): 490

<sup>14</sup> Emory Evans, A "Topping People:" *The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680-1790*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 2

<sup>15</sup> Brydon, G. MacLaren. "English Education of Thomas Nelson, Jr., of Yorktown." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 51, no. 4 (1943): 347-50. Accessed September 25, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4245255>.

his father's plantations throughout the Tidewater and in Albemarle County and trained for a future in the mercantile trade. Nelson's wife, Lucy Grymes, whom he married in 1762, had sons (from her first marriage) that inherited several large plantations and Nelson acted as guardian to his young stepsons and managed their plantation holdings, including Carter's Grove in James City County.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Nelson, by this time, had accumulated substantial land and property of his own. Upon his marriage, William Nelson, his father, gave him a large landed estate of 20,000 acres, 400 slaves, and £30,000 which enabled Thomas Nelson, Jr. to maintain an elegant lifestyle as a country gentleman.<sup>17</sup> As the colonies were fighting the American Revolution, Nelson purchased an additional 5400 acres of agricultural land along with an unknown number of enslaved African Americans in Prince William County from financially struggling family member, Lewis Burwell.

Unwise and extravagant spending on furnishings and horseracing, Burwell, like many in the gentry class during this time spent opulently during the "consumer revolution." They borrowed heavily against their future tobacco crops to purchase fine clothing, furnishings, carriages, and other material goods that helped to clearly delineate the gentry class from their social inferiors. The gentry class found it necessary to reassert their wealth and power because the "middling sort" in Virginia could now afford to approximate some material symbols of the upper class due to the advent of the Industrial Revolution in England. Once luxury goods, exclusively owned by those in elite society, were now machined rather than being handmade by artisans, resulting in a larger supply and cheaper prices in the colonies.<sup>18</sup> Those in the gentry class valued the display of wealth and often had long term relationships with traders that operated out the port town on the York River. Nelson, like much of the gentry class, was not immune to imprudent indulgences as well, even though he was heavily in debt to London trading firms. In December 1773, Thomas & Rowland Hunt, a firm that three generations of Nelsons had regularly patronized, held his debt of 1000 pounds which was overdue. Falling tobacco prices and excessive purchasing resulted in the firm charging Nelson interest on the debt. Despite his outrage at what he perceived as a slight, Nelson still did not rectify the debt and the firm threatened to discontinue business based on the delinquency. In the midst of this disintegrating relationship, Thomas Nelson, Jr., rather than squaring his debts in 1773, instead added to his land holdings by purchasing 120 acres in York County, he acquired three more enslaved people, and ordered, for his mother, a new carriage with the Nelson family crest adorning the side costing a staggering 100 pounds sterling.<sup>19</sup>

An early advocate of revolution, Thomas Nelson, Jr. joined non-importation societies, at great personal expense to his family's trade business, in staunch opposition to the Townshend Duties, Parliament's policy of taxation for its colonies. The Nelson Family was able to leverage the influence of their gentry class status with their mercantile dominance to compel residents

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<sup>16</sup> Lorena S. Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: the History of a Virginia Slave Community* (University Press of Virginia, 1997) p. 214

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2009/11/lucy-grymes-nelson.html>

<sup>18</sup> T.H. Breen, "'The Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 199 (1988)

<sup>19</sup> Evans, Emory G. *Thomas Nelson of Yorktown*, pg. 27.

of Yorktown into compliance with non-importation agreements. Yorktown, as a result, was relatively successful in their boycott of British goods while other Virginia port cities were not.<sup>20</sup> Nelson went on to become an influential representative of York County, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and a delegate to the Continental Congress. In a Richmond convention in 1775 Nelson was cheered by attending members and celebrated by Thomas Jefferson for demonstrating his determination declaring, "...if any British troops are landed in the County of York, of which I am lieutenant, I will wait for no orders, but will summon the militia and drive the invaders into the sea."<sup>21</sup> Nelson proved exemplary at raising, and donating much of his own, money for the patriot cause. He served as General of the Virginia State militia and, later, as governor, directing troop movements and the progress of the war in Virginia. Praise for Thomas Nelson, Jr. came from other prominent gentry men of a similar mind, too. Author of the Constitution, James Madison wrote, "General Nelson...was excelled by no man in the generosity of his nature, in the nobleness of his sentiments, in the purity of his Revolutionary principles, and in the exalted patriotism that answered every service and sacrifice that his country might need."<sup>22</sup> Upon his death, Thomas Nelson, Jr. was, of course, remembered for his contributions to Virginia and his country but Colonel Innes wanted to comment on his character and wrote, "after contemplating the splendid and heroic parts of his character, we shall inquire for the milder virtues of humanity, and seek for the man, we shall find the refined, beneficent, and social qualities of private life, through all its forms and combinations, so happily modified and united in him." Innes closed with a poem that he believed to describe Nelson, offering "his life was gentle: and the elements so mixed in him, that nature might stand up and say to all the world—this was a man."<sup>23</sup>

While the perception of Nelson from his fellow gentrymen seems unanimously generous, Nelson's own views on the African Americans that labored for his benefit seem more ambivalent. Growing up as a privileged young man in Yorktown in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, he would have been witness to the surging numbers of unfree African Americans arriving in Yorktown's port and sold from his grandfather and father's store. Young Nelson's life as a gentryman would have been entirely shaped, consciously or unconsciously, by the ownership of human beings. A permanent enslaved underclass meant from the time of his birth Thomas Nelson, Jr. was a "master" requiring deference not just from financially and socially inferior whites, but from the ever-present Black unfree laboring class as well. Every part of his upbringing depended on enslaved people. Unfree African Americans would have cooked the food he ate, worked in the fields he was to inherit, and those Africans imported and sold by his father and grandfather inevitably helped pay for his education in England. Upon his marriage he was gifted 400 enslaved people in addition to land and property which secured his position in the gentry elite.

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<sup>20</sup> Ames, Eric F., "'The Spirit of Association': The Nelson Family and Commercial Resistance in Yorktown, Virginia 1769-1771" (2012). Undergraduate Honors Theses. Paper 478. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/478>

<sup>21</sup> Yorktown Preservation Society, <https://ypsva.org/the-nelsons-of-yorktown/>

<sup>22</sup> Evans, Emory G. *Thomas Nelson of Yorktown*, pg, 140

<sup>23</sup> Charles Augustus Goodrich (1837). *Lives of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence*. T.Mather. Pp. 410-414.

In many ways, Thomas Nelson, Jr. seems to have embraced the paternalistic role as master endowed upon him as a man in the gentry class. Throughout the span of his life, Nelson routinely bought, sold, and entailed hundreds of enslaved people in his will – determining circumstances over which enslaved people had no input. In addition, Nelson vigorously advertised substantial rewards for the return or capture of slaves that had run away. However, while weighty evidence points to his father and grandfather imported and sold slaves from the Yorktown port, no such advertisements can be found attributed to Thomas Nelson, Jr. This absence of evidence could be an ethical awakening (George Wythe of Williamsburg developed a belief in “simply abolition” toward the end of his life but was generally characterized as a radical by his contemporaries) or, as is more probably the case, the importation of enslaved Africans into Yorktown was a practice near extinction when Nelson, Jr. took over the mercantile business. In a freefall by the mid-18th century, depreciated tobacco prices required most small farmers, for financial viability, to sell their meager yields to larger planters with deep water access for the purposes of export. Nutrient-depleting cultivation of a single cash crop required the incessant clearing of new land. Large planters, who could afford to purchase vast tracts in the West, continued to cultivate tobacco and trading ships eventually circumvented Yorktown, where Nelson had his mercantile business, and instead navigated up the James River to pick up tobacco exports. Even there, however, fewer enslaved people were being offloaded, not because the practice of slavery was dying out, but because the rate of natural reproduction had increased to a point that the importation of Africans was almost unnecessary. Advertisements in this period proudly advertise “Virginian born” slaves instead of touting “Angolan” slaves.<sup>24</sup>

Within the context of the American Revolution, Nelson’s complicated relationship with race is again worth considering. Fighting alongside George Washington at the Battle of Yorktown, where his own house was at risk, William “Billy” Lee, George Washington’s enslaved personal attendant, who accompanied Washington in wartime, is reported to have told Nelson, “...On you [Nelson] it depends more than any man I know to save the lower part, indeed the whole Country from Confusion and Ruin.”<sup>25</sup> Lee’s high regard for Nelson may have, in part, been a reciprocation for Nelson’s acknowledgment of his military service, in spite of his enslavement. In no other circumstance does Nelson seem to acknowledge the humanity of enslaved people but he seems to waiver on the issue of emancipation for enslaved people who fought for the Americans:

*the last plan adopted by the Assembly, of drafting in the manner there proposd, has been productive of much evil and little good, many of those drafted being unfit for service, or free Mulattoes and Negroes, as it was generally thought they could best be spar’d. This I think*

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<sup>24</sup> MUSSELWHITE, PAUL, PETER C. MANCALL, and JAMES HORN, eds. *Virginia 1619: Slavery and Freedom in the Making of English America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Accessed September 28, 2020. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469651811\\_musselwhite](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469651811_musselwhite).

<sup>25</sup> Riley, Edward M. "Yorktown during the Revolution: Part I." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 57, no. 1 (1949): 22-43. Accessed September 28, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4245601>.

*exceedingly unjust, because these poor Wretches, after they have risk'd their lives, & perhaps may have contributed to save America, will not be entitled to the priviledges of Freeman.*<sup>26</sup>

At his death, Thomas Nelson Jr.'s will and inventory belay his lifelong investment in the institution of slavery and his wish to perpetuate that system through the next generation, at least. The inventory, which simply documents all possessions in his households, carefully notes property and appraises the value. More than 75 percent of Thomas Nelson's wealth, at the time of his death, was represented in the 219 human beings he owned. Dwarfing the monetary value of silk curtains, mahogany stools, and china teacups he owned, enslaved women were listed "with their increase" to indicate they had children included in their value. Of the hundreds listed, some slaves were willed to family members, plucked from one household and redeployed at Nelson's notion, with no regard for any familial relations that would remain behind. Executors would use land and the sale of slaves to settle his substantial debts. One enslaved man, however, stands apart. An avid horseman, Nelson, who gifted General George Washington the horse he rode to Cornwallis's surrender, used his will to emancipate one out of the hundreds of slaves he had owned through his life, a man named Smith Harry – his blacksmith.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "To George Washington from Brigadier General Thomas Nelson, Jr., 21–22 November 1777," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0340>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 12, 26 October 1777–25 December 1777, ed. Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. and David R. Hoth. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002, pp. 341–343.]

<sup>27</sup> <http://hglanham.tripod.com/Horses/horses68.html>