

# A NEWCOMER TO MARYLAND DISCOVERS HIS DEEP FAMILY ROOTS IN THE OLD LINE STATE

By  
Brent Evan Newton

A year after my father died in 2012, I decided to research my family tree. My mother's sister had compiled a good family tree for my maternal side, so I opted to focus more on my father's side. I knew virtually nothing about his ancestors, other than that his parents (my grandparents) were first cousins and that his father had served in General Pershing's expeditionary force of 6,000 soldiers who had chased after Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa in 1916. Ironically, my father, Wesley Phillips Newton, who had become a distinguished professor of military history after returning from World War II (where he had been a POW in Germany), was totally ignorant of his own family history. None of his siblings remained after his death, so I was left to research genealogical books and internet sources, beginning with Ancestry.com.

As far as I knew, when I started researching my paternal ancestors, I had none who came from Maryland as well as no living relatives in the state. I assumed that most of what I would find would relate to my ancestors in Alabama, where my parents (and I) were born and raised. I had only visited Maryland briefly once before my wife, two daughters, and I moved to Montgomery County, Maryland in 2009, after I had accepted a job in Washington, D.C. To my surprise, I discovered that a long line of my paternal ancestors had lived in what was then colonial Maryland. I also discovered a series of remarkable coincidences related to those ancestors, which I will discuss below.

## **Evan Watkins' Ferry on the Potomac River**

The first significant Maryland-born ancestor whom I encountered in my research was Evan Watkins (circa 1709-1765), my sixth great-grandfather. He appears to have been born in Talbot County, Maryland. I will discuss his place in history more below. His great-granddaughter, Rebecca Watkins (1789-1850), married Rueben Phillips

(1777-1856). The two of them were the first of my direct paternal ancestors to have moved to Alabama. They were some of the original settlers in the newly formed State of Alabama in 1819.<sup>1</sup>

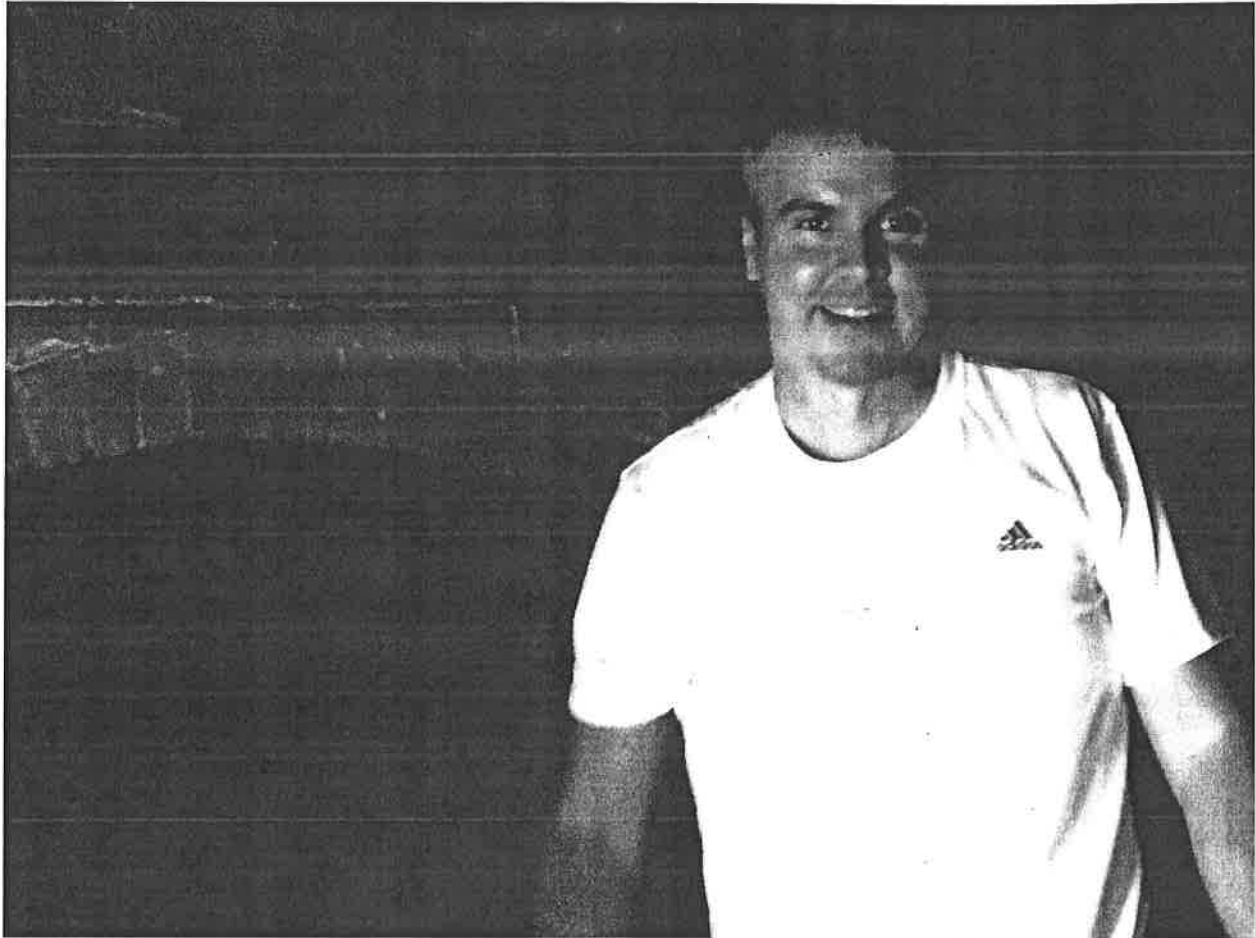
I had always wondered why my father's middle name was Phillips – with an “s”. When I asked my dad, he said it must have been a typo in his birth record; he assumed his parents had meant “Phillip.” Now I know better. It was a family name. In researching that line of the family tree, I noticed that virtually every generation's children were given a first or middle name that had been a given name or surname of someone in a prior generation. As I will discuss below, that practice of naming children after ancestors has amazing significance in my case.

Evan Watkins was the founder and operator of Watkins Ferry, one of the more well-known ferries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that crossed the Potomac River. His ferry crossed the Potomac between Falling Waters, Virginia (now West Virginia) and Williamsport, Maryland. It was located less than 20 miles downstream from a more famous ferry on the Potomac, Harper's Ferry. I was intrigued when I made the discovery of Watkins Ferry because my wife, two daughters, and I had moved to Maryland from Texas in 2009. Our home in North Potomac, Maryland, is just an hour's drive from where Watkins operated his ferry. What is particularly coincidental is that I had previously taken my younger daughter to play in softball tournaments in the small town of Williamsport (pop. 2,100), where there is a softball complex. Little did I know then that it was where my sixth great-grandfather had operated a ferry across the Potomac nearly three centuries before.

On Ancestry.com, I noticed that some other descendants of Evan Watkins had posted photographs and other materials about Watkins Ferry. One of

them was an application that a subsequent owner of the ferry house had filed seeking historical landmark status with the Department of the Interior. I read the application and was happy to learn that the ferry house still stands and has a historical marker.<sup>2</sup> In 2014, I took my wife and daughters there and

actually was able to go inside the original building that my sixth great-grandfather had constructed. I touched the fireplace and other parts of the home that he had built nearly three centuries ago.



**Figure 1. The author inside the ferry house built by his sixth-great grandfather in the mid-1700s.**

A few weeks later, I went back to Berkeley County, West Virginia – the county in which the ferry house is located – and visited the local historical society's office. A county historian pulled a box of materials on Watkins Ferry for me to review. I obtained a copy of the original land grant, shown in figure 2, that conveyed the land on which the ferry house was built, which had been signed by Lord Fairfax – the namesake of Fairfax County, Virginia.

I also learned that two of the most famous generals in American history had crossed the Potomac at the site of Watkins Ferry during wartime.

George Washington had used the ferry on his way to Fort Duquesne in colonial Pittsburgh in 1755 during the French-Indian War, at the time that Evan Watkins was operating the ferry.<sup>3</sup> A century later, after Evan Watkins had died, Union General Abner Doubleday (the apocryphal inventor of baseball) crossed the ferry as he pursued Robert E. Lee's troops and, a month later, Lee's defeated confederate troops crossed the Potomac at the ferry's location after the Battle of Gettysburg.<sup>4</sup> The ferry house that Evan Watkins built is seen in a famous lithograph, figure 3, depicting troops' crossing the Potomac.

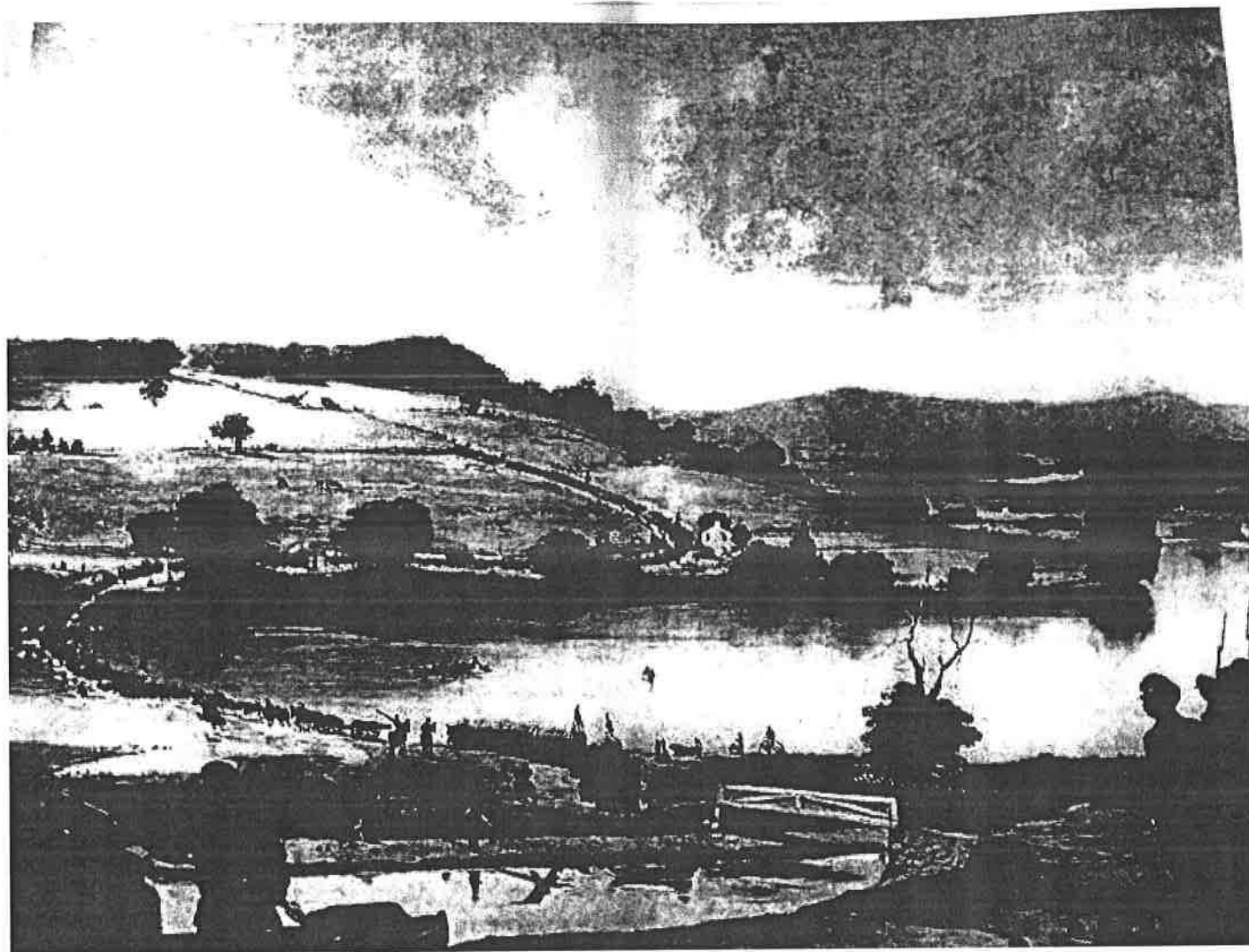
The Right Honourable Thomas Lord Fairfax Baron of  
 Common in that part of Great Britain called Scotland Proprietor of the Northern Neck  
 of Virginia do all to whom this present Writing shall come send greeting Shew  
 that for good causes for your consideration of the composition to me paid for the Annual  
 Rent hereafter to be reserved I have given granted & confirmed & by these presents for me my  
 Heirs & Assigns do give Grant & confirm unto Evan Watkins of Frederick County a certain  
 Tract of waste & ungranted Land on Potomack River in the said County & bounded as by a  
 Survey thereof made by Thomas Austerford Beginning at a Sugar Tree on the bank of  
 Potomack River to Mandstone Common thence along the Due of the said Common S<sup>64</sup> 17<sup>1</sup>  
 three hundred & sixty poles to three red oak Saplings corner to the Common extending thence  
 N<sup>16</sup> 10<sup>1</sup> one hundred & thirty eight poles to a Chestnut Oak near the head of a Spring corner  
 to Jeremiah Archline thence with his line N<sup>20</sup> 0<sup>1</sup> forty poles to a Sycamore on the bank of  
 Potomack River extending thence down the same S<sup>65</sup> 0<sup>1</sup> sixty poles & thence S<sup>53</sup> 0<sup>1</sup>  
 three hundred & twelve poles to the Beginning containing two hundred & fifty two  
 Acres Together with all Rights Members & Appurtenances therunto belonging  
 Royal mines excepted & a full third part of a Sand Copper Iron Coals Iron Mine  
 & Iron Ore that shall be found thereon to have & to hold the said two hundred &  
 fifty two Acres of Land Together with all rights profits & benefits to the same belong-  
 -ing or in anywise appertaining except before excepted to him the said Evan Watkins  
 his Heirs & Assigns for ever He the said Evan Watkins his Heirs or Assigns therefore  
 Yielding & paying to me my Heirs or Assigns or to my certain Attorney or Attorneys  
 Agent or Agents or to the certain Attorney or Attorneys of my Heirs or Assigns Propri-  
 etors of the said Northern Neck yearly & every year on the Feast day of St Michael  
 the Archangel the Year next of one shilling sterling Money for every fifty Acres of  
 Land hereby granted & so proportionally for a Greater or lesser Quantity & if  
 provided that if the said Evan Watkins his Heirs or Assigns shall not pay the said  
 Reserved Annual Rent as aforesaid so that the same or any part thereof shall  
 be behind or unpaid by the Space of two whole Years after the same shall become  
 due if Legally demanded that then it shall & may <sup>be prosecuted</sup> for me my Heirs or Assigns  
 Proprietors as aforesaid my or their certain Attorney or Attorneys Agent or Agents into  
 the above granted premises to Rent & hold the same so as if this Grant had never  
 passed Given at my Office in the County of Frederick under my hand & Seal dated  
 the Twentieth day of March In the Second Year of his Majesty King George  
 the third reign D 1702.

Fairfax

Evan Watkins's deed  
 for 252 Acres Frederick County

Ev<sup>o</sup> J<sup>r</sup> Midd<sup>l</sup> Bry. Watkins

Figure 2. Land Grant Issued by Lord Fairfax to Evan Watkins for Watkins Ferry



**Figure 3. Lithograph Depicting Troops Crossing at Watkins Ferry in 1863 (the Ferry House Is Seen in the Middle)**

What is particularly remarkable about Evan Watkins is that my middle name is “Evan.” My mother and father had absolutely no idea that he was my ancestor when they chose that name. My mother remembers picking it out of a book of 1960s baby names, along with my first name “Brent”.

#### **An Earlier Evan Watkins, Margaret Brent, John Nuthall, and Brent Nuthall of St. Mary’s City**

I continued working on my family tree after visiting Watkins Ferry. I traced that branch of the tree back to Evan Watkins’s grandfather, Peter Watkins (circa 1664 - 1697), my eighth great-grandfather, who settled in Talbot County, Maryland. I learned that his wife, my eighth great-grandmother, was named Anne Nuthall (circa 1672 - ?). In late 2014, I stopped looking further back in the family tree beyond Peter and Anne, having lost interest in the earlier ancestors on that branch of the family tree.

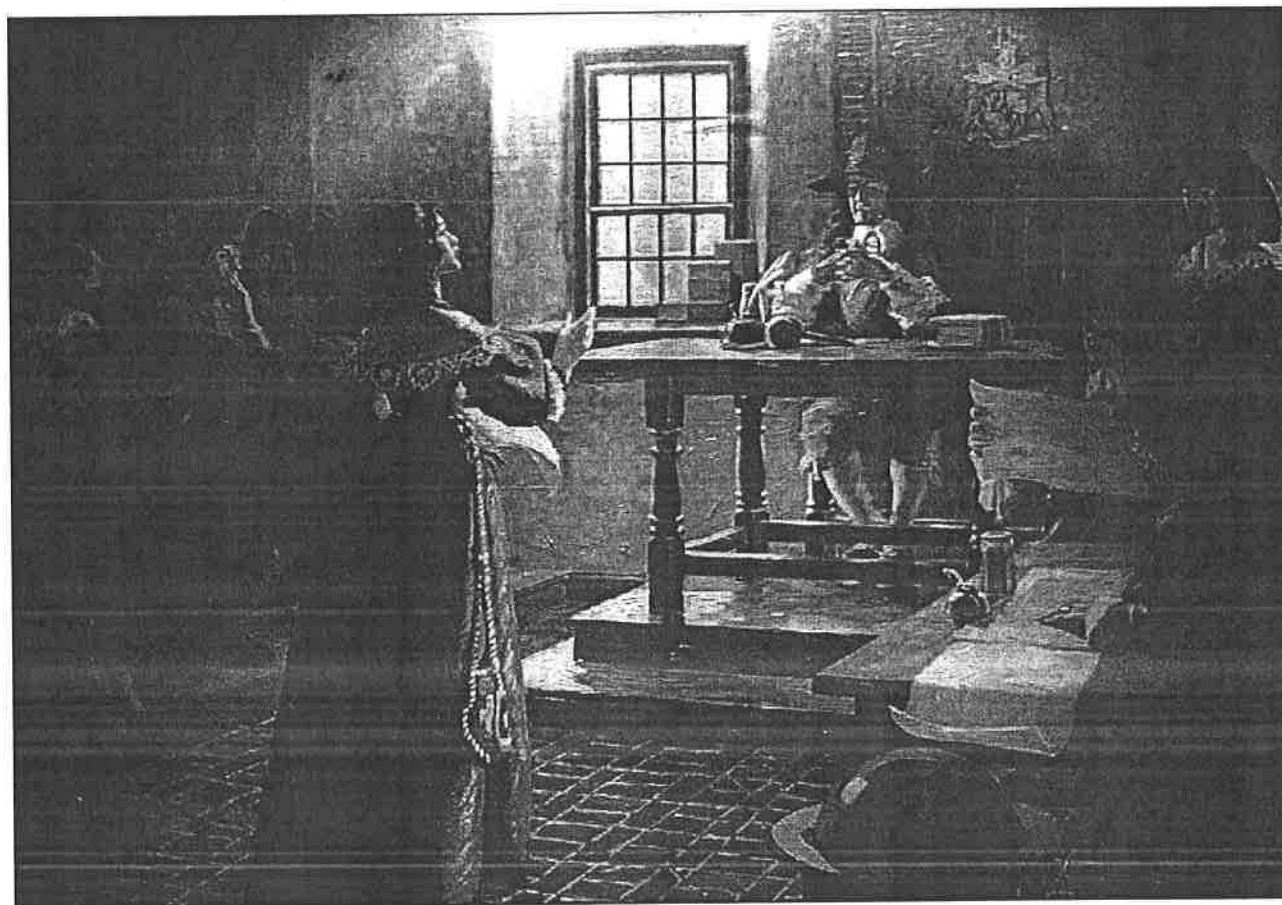
On September 6, 2015 – a date that itself proved to be coincidental (as discussed below) – I took my wife and younger daughter to visit St. Mary’s City, Maryland, which was the original city in colonial Maryland, founded in 1634. St. Mary’s City was the third English settlement in America (after Jamestown, Virginia, and Plymouth, Massachusetts).<sup>5</sup> It is a two-hour drive from our home in Montgomery County. I didn’t go there with the intent of conducting ancestral research and certainly did not expect to come upon any information about my ancestors. Rather, true to my roots as a history major in college and the son of two history professors, I simply wanted to visit the site of Maryland’s first settlement.

In 1634, St. Mary’s City was settled by a hundred or so people who traveled on two ships – the

Arc and the Dove – from England to what later was named Maryland.<sup>6</sup> In a museum in St. Mary's City, we saw a list of the ships' original passengers. My eyes almost popped out when I came across the name Evans Watkins (Evans with an "s"). I immediately wondered whether he could be an ancestor of "my" Evan Watkins. Since that discovery, I have researched Evans Watkins and have been unable to find anything about him other than that the leading historian of St. Mary's City, who was employed by the State Archives of Maryland, listed his name as Evan Watkins (without an "s"), the same name as my known ancestor.<sup>7</sup> It certainly is possible that the earlier Evan Watkins was an ancestor of the subsequent Evan Watkins, who was born in Talbot County, Maryland, another early colonial settlement

not too far from St. Mary's City. I doubt that I will ever know one way or the other.

While we were in the museum in St. Mary's City, we came across exhibits about some of the other earliest inhabitants of the old city. One was named Margaret Brent (1601-1671). Her last name was the same as my first name. I joked to my wife, "maybe I am related to her *and* Evans Watkins." Margaret Brent is famous because she was one of America's original feminists. She was an unmarried landowner in an era when women almost never owned land in their own name, unsuccessfully demanded the right to vote from the original Maryland colonial assembly (on the basis that she was a landowner), figure 4, and also served as a legal advisor to Lord Baltimore.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 4. Margaret Brent Demanding the Right to Vote from the Maryland Colonial Assembly (Courtesy of Historic St Mary's City, MD)**

After I read the exhibit about Margaret Brent, I noticed another name that stood out to me among the early residents of St. Mary's City – Brent Nuthall (1697-1759). He shared my first name. In addition to Brent, several of the inhabitants of colonial St.

Mary's City had the last name Nuthall. I wondered if my eighth great-grandmother, Anne Nuthall (circa 1672 - ?) – ferry operator Evan Watkins's grandmother – was related to the Nuthalls of St. Mary's City. When I returned home that night and

did some more ancestral research,<sup>9</sup> my suspicion was confirmed. Anne Nuthall was the daughter of Elias Nuthall (circa 1650 - 1704) and granddaughter of John Nuthall (circa 1614 - circa 1667) (also known as "John Nuthall of Cross Manor," based on the name of his manor in St. Mary's County) - meaning John Nuthall and Elias Nuthall are my tenth and ninth great-grandfathers.<sup>10</sup> Further research revealed that Brent Nuthall was the great-grandson of John Nuthall of Cross Manor in a different branch of the same Nuthall family tree. Anne Nuthall and Brent Nuthall were distant cousins. Although he is not a direct ancestor, Brent Nuthall is a very distant cousin of mine (apparently, my "second cousin nine times removed").

Brent Nuthall also was the great nephew of Margaret Brent, to whom I am even more remotely related. Margaret had no children, but her brother Giles Brent (1600-1672), who at one time was Deputy Governor of colonial Maryland, did.<sup>11</sup> Giles Brent's son Giles II (circa 1652 - ?), married his first cousin, Mary Brent I (circa 1650 - ?), and one of their children was Mary Brent II (circa 1675 - circa 1698). Brent Nuthall was the son of the younger Mary and John Nuthall (circa 1670 - circa 1714), the grandson of John Nuthall of Cross Manor. Mary Brent II was thus the great-niece of Margaret Brent, making Brent Nuthall her great-great-nephew. What makes this all so remarkable is that, as I have noted, my parents coincidentally chose my first name, Brent, out of a book of baby names with no idea about its genealogical significance.

Also notable is the fact that Brent Nuthall's step-mother was Eleanor Sprigg (circa 1670-1728), who married Brent's father (and her own first cousin), John Nuthall, after his first wife (Brent's mother, Mary Brent II), died. Eleanor Sprigg was the daughter of Thomas Sprigg (1630-1704) and Elinor Nuthall (circa 1645 - ?). As I explain below, I have another connection to the Sprigg family, also by marriage - an even more coincidental and significant one.

### **Thomas Sprigg Wootton: First Speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates and Namesake of My Daughters' High School**

As I was researching the Nuthalls after returning from my trip to St. Mary's City on September 6, 2015, I came across the surname "Sprigg" on two separate instances. The first - Brent Nuthall's step-mother, Eleanor Sprigg (circa 1670 - 1728) - was noted above. The second was Eleanor's mother and namesake with a different spelling, Elinor Nuthall (circa 1645 - ?). Elinor was the sister of my ninth great-grandfather, Elias Nuthall (circa 1650 - 1704). Elinor married Thomas Sprigg (1630-1704) and became the step-mother of his son, Thomas Sprigg II (c. 1668-?). According to family records, she raised him as her own son.

When I saw the name "Sprigg," a bell went off in my head. My older daughter, Anna, graduated from Thomas Sprigg Wootton High School in Montgomery County, Maryland, and my younger daughter, Georgia, is currently in her junior year there. Wootton (circa 1740 - 1789), the first Speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates, is known as the "father" of Montgomery County, Maryland, and also was an original signer of the constitution of the State of Maryland. He also played an important role in the early Revolutionary War. His leadership in the first House of Delegates resulted in the provision of desperately needed troops from the Maryland militia to George Washington in the Battle of Long Island in the early days of the Revolutionary War. Washington was impressed with the courage and skill of those Maryland soldiers, and his compliments about them led to Maryland's eventual nickname, "Old Line State" - in recognition of those troops' "holding the line" in battle. Washington referred to them as "the old line" that preserved the union.<sup>12</sup> The name stuck.<sup>13</sup>

I researched Thomas Sprigg II's descendants to see if there was a connection to the namesake of my daughters' high school. I quickly learned that Thomas Sprigg II was the grandfather of Thomas Sprigg Wootton. Thomas Sprigg II's daughter, Elizabeth Sprigg (circa 1703 - 1787), married Turner Wootton (1695 - 1760), and one of their children was Thomas Sprigg Wootton. Although I have no blood relation to Wootton - as my genealogical ties are through marriage rather than biological - the family connection is nonetheless remarkable.

## NUTHALL/BRENT/SPRIGG/WATKINS/WOOTTON FAMILIAL TIES

John **Nuthall** of Cross Manor (b. 1618) → John Nuthall (b. circa 1648) [brother of Elinor Nuthall (b. 1645), who married Thomas **Sprigg** (b. 1630), great-grandfather of Thomas Sprigg **Wootton** (b. 1740); brother of Elias Nuthall (b. 1650), great-grandfather of Evan **Watkins** (b. 1709)] → John Nuthall (b. 1670) [second wife was his first cousin, Eleanor **Sprigg** (b. 1670)] → Brent Nuthall (b. 1697)

Giles **Brent** (b. 1604) [brother of Margaret Brent] → Giles Brent (b. 1652) → Mary Brent (b. 1675) → Brent Nuthall (b. 1697)

My genealogical connection to Thomas Sprigg Wootton hits even closer to home – literally – than do my more direct ancestral connections to Evan Watkins or the Nuthalls of St. Mary's County. Thomas Sprigg Wootton lived on a farm in Montgomery County, Maryland, where he was buried after he died, and that property (now developed) is located *just three miles away* from my current residence in North Potomac, Maryland.<sup>14</sup> Of course,

did a great deal of research about school options in advance of moving to Maryland and decided on Wootton High School – and then looked for a house zoned to it.

A final coincidence alluded to above: my trip to St. Mary's City, which inspired me to research the Nuthall and Brent lines and which resulted in my accidental discovery of the Sprigg line, was on September 6, 2015. It just so happens, as I later learned, that September 6<sup>th</sup> is "Founders Day" in Montgomery County, Maryland, in recognition of that day in 1776, when Thomas Sprigg Wootton secured passage of a state constitutional amendment that created Montgomery County as an independent county government.

### Conclusion

One of the greatest regrets that I have is that I did not undertake my ancestral research until after my father had died. As a professor of history, he would have been delighted to learn that his ancestors had dealings with Lord Fairfax, Lord Baltimore, and George Washington. As a military historian in particular, he would have been intrigued to learn that both Washington and later Robert E. Lee had crossed the Potomac at Watkins Ferry's location during wartime and also to learn of his genealogical ties to Thomas Sprigg Wootton, whose leadership in the initial Maryland House of Delegates helped earn Maryland its nickname, "The Old Line State." As a good liberal, he would have taken pride in being related to Margaret Brent, one of America's first feminists. He would have chuckled at the fact that, like his own parents, some of his ancestors in the Brent/Nuthall/Sprigg line had married their first cousins. And, no doubt, he would have been in utter amazement that the first and middle names that he and my mother had chosen for me from a book of

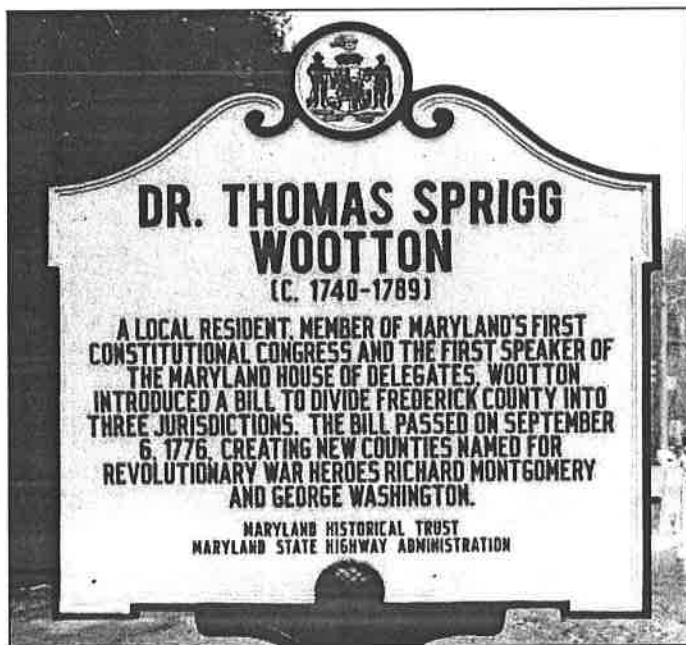


Figure 5. Historical Marker in the Front of Thomas Sprigg Wootton High School in Rockville, MD

I did not have any idea of that fact or my distant familial relation to him when my family moved to Montgomery County from Texas in 2009. Coincidentally, we chose our current location – out of all of the potential towns in the greater Washington, D.C., metropolitan area – based primarily on the fact that Wootton High School is considered one of very best public high schools in America. My wife and I

baby names – Brent Evan – were each prominent names in his ancestry.

To me, the most remarkable fact about my story is that I moved to Montgomery County,

Maryland, in 2009 entirely ignorant of my family tree's many deep roots in the county and the State. The rest is history . . . or ancestry.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See St. Clair Heritage Book Committee, *The Heritage of St. Clair County, Alabama* 348 (1998). Evan Watkins was the father of Peter Watkins (1733-1801); Peter Watkins was the father of Evan "Jack" Watkins (1767-1840), who was the father of Rebecca Watkins. Rebecca was the mother of Jackson Phillips (1819-1898), who was the father of Ida Phillips (1859-1917) and Elizabeth Phillips (1852-1919). Ida married William Pegues (1856-1933), and Elizabeth married Willis Newton (1847-1917). Ida's daughter Florence married Elizabeth's son (and her first cousin) Wesley Phillips Newton, Sr. – who were my paternal grandparents.

<sup>2</sup> That application is available at <http://www.wvculture.org/shpo/nr/pdf/berkeley/04000311.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See Douglass R. Cubbison, *On Campaign Against Fort Duquesne* 68 (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Department of Interior application, at pp. 7-8, <http://www.wvculture.org/shpo/nr/pdf/berkeley/04000311.pdf> ("Doubleday would figure in the history of the property again in 1863, when on June 7, his troops pursued those of Robert E. Lee as they moved northward towards Gettysburg. The Federal troops' crossing of the then shallow river was chronicled by noted illustrator David Gilmore Blythe. . . [The ferry house] appears clearly in the Blythe lithograph. One month later, as Lee retreated after his debacle at Gettysburg, the ford/ferry Williamsport and [the ferry house] saw the passage of more than 70,000 confederates.").

<sup>5</sup> "Historic St. Mary's City," <http://www.smcm.edu/about/history4/historic-st-marys-city/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Maryland Commemorates 380th Anniversary of Founding Voyage," [http://www.cecildaily.com/our\\_cecil/article\\_38da6944-68ed-5de8-a881-c5e9611bebfe.html](http://www.cecildaily.com/our_cecil/article_38da6944-68ed-5de8-a881-c5e9611bebfe.html) (listing the passengers on the Arc and Dove, including "Evans Watkins").

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Lois Green Carr, "Men's Career Files" of original inhabitants of St. Mary's City, Maryland, "Evan Watkins," <http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc5000/sc5094/004000/004451/html/sc5094-4451.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Maryland State Archives, Biography of Margaret Giles, <http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/002100/002177/html/bio.html> & <http://msa.maryland.gov/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/002100/002177/html/brochure.html>.

<sup>9</sup> I found two fruitful sources of information about the early inhabitants of Maryland (including several of my ancestors) in *Maryland and Virginia Colonials: Genealogies of Some Colonial Families* (1998), by Sharon J. Doliante, and the Maryland State Archives' files about the early settlers in St. Mary's City. The latter can be searched on-line at <http://msa.maryland.gov/msa/speccol/html/carr.html>.

<sup>10</sup> The direct lineage from John Nuthall of Cross Manor to Evan Watkins is as follows: John Nuthall (b. circa 1614) → Elias Nuthall (b. circa 1650) → Anne Nuthall (b. circa 1672) → Peter Watkins (b. circa 1689) → Evan Watkins (b. 1709).

<sup>11</sup> "Exploring Maryland's Early Roots: Giles Brent, (1600-1672)," <http://mdroots.thinkport.org/library/gilesbrent.asp>.

<sup>12</sup> *Maryland 400*, <https://woottonhs.wordpress.com/maryland-400/> (discussing the role of Maryland troops in the Battle of Brooklyn, also called the Battle of Long Island); "Founders' Day Recognizes Namesake," *Common Sense*, <http://woottonnews.com/founders-day-recognizes-namesake/> (Oct. 2, 2014) (stating that, Wootton "contributed to decisions relating to training, funding and providing weapons and other supplies to the state militia. Five weeks after declaring independence from Great Britain, during the Battle of Brooklyn in New York, General George Washington was in a state of defeat. However, the soldiers that Wootton had prepared aided Washington in retreating[.]"). "George Washington often cited that the Maryland militia and their action that day saved the nation." *Ibid.* See also *The Battle of Brooklyn*, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-battle-of-brooklyn>.

<sup>13</sup> Maryland State Archives, *Holding the Line: The Origin of "The Old Line State,"* <http://aomol.msa.maryland.gov/html/oldline.html>.

<sup>14</sup> "Find a Grave: Thomas Sprigg Wootton," <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=108270150>; see also "Historic Designation Evaluation Analysis," <http://rockvillemd.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1056> (noting that Thomas Spriggs Wootton's farm was located at what is now 9200 Darnestown Road in Rockville, MD).





# Chronicles of St. Mary's

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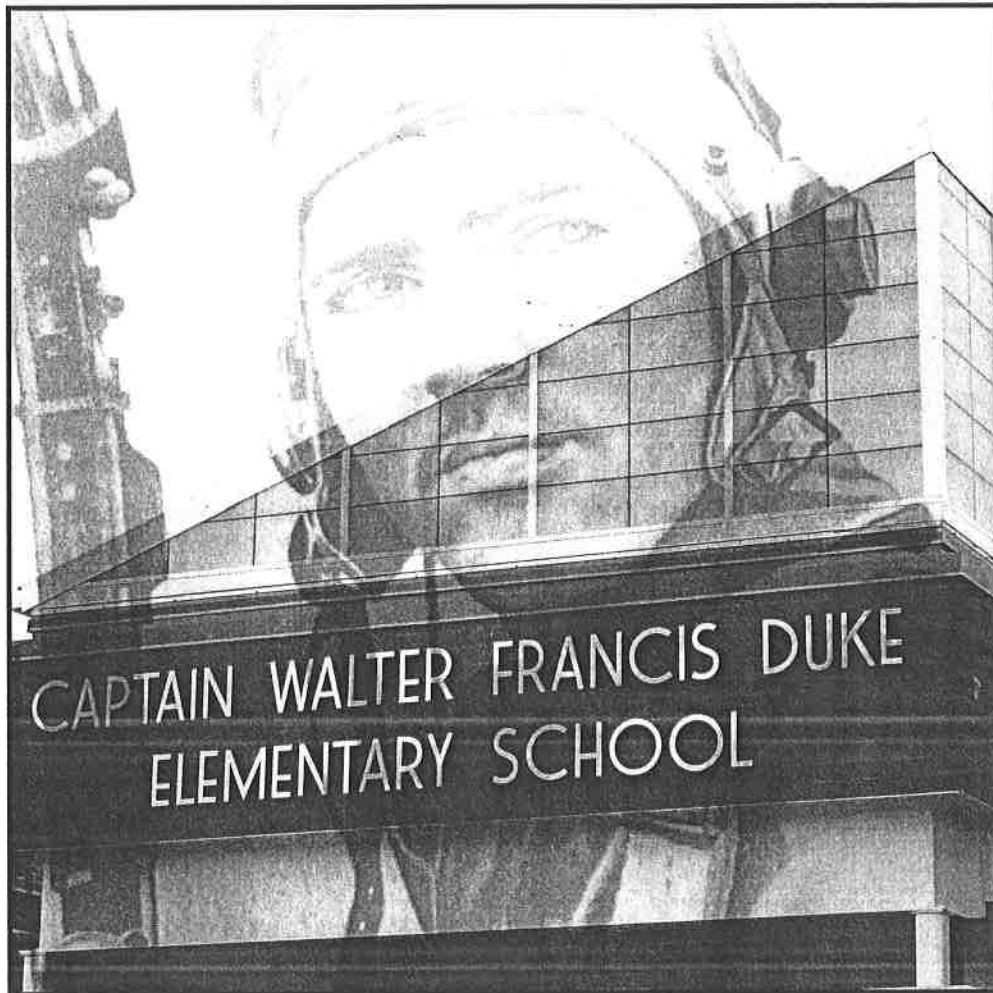


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