

Arlington

Let us go back and look at the history of the Custis family. Where did they come from? We can go back as far as the grandfather of John Custis. His name was Edmund and he lived in Gloucestershire England. He gave a deposition in 1609 saying that he resided in the town of Bibury, and he was a clothier. This means he was a businessman involved in the cloth trade. Edmund was part of the rising middle class. Bibury was a small town situated on a small river. On the other side of the river was another small town called Arlington.

It seems that their name was not always Custis. One old record refers to him as Edmund Custis, “alias Cliffe” and the baptismal record for his son John reads, “John Clift als Custis, son of Edmund Cliff als Custis”. This record in 1592 is the earliest mention of the surname Custis in England. Cliffe, on the other hand, is a location surname common to many parts of England. For example, it can be found among the gentry of Yorkshire as early as 1200 AD. That Cliff family had a coat of arms which was “adopted” by three generations of Eastern Shore Custis men and is displayed on the tomb of John Custis. The reason for this alias or name change remains one of the biggest mysteries surrounding the Custis family.

About 1627, two of Edmund’s sons, Henry and John, moved to the Dutch city of Rotterdam. This is a bit south of Amsterdam in what is now called The Netherlands. In addition to the family trading business, records show that Henry ran an Inn which, over the years, was frequented by many Englishmen who had left England for religious or political reasons.

About 1649, a man named Argoll Yardley, son of the first colonial governor. Of Virginia, Sir George Yardley, made a trip to Rotterdam on business. There he met Miss Ann Custis, daughter of Henry, and sister of our John Custis who built Arlington. They were married and Argoll returned here to The Eastern Shore of Virginia with his new bride. At the same time, or shortly thereafter, they were followed by her two brothers, John, and William. While John ultimately settled here, William settled near the seaside in Accomack County where he still has many descendants living today.

The number of men named John Custis is confusing to many people. The man who built Arlington is referred to as John Custis II. In the 1650s there were two men in Northampton County named John Custis. The most senior was actually John’s uncle and is referred to as John Custis 1st. Whether he remained on The Shore and died or returned to Holland is not known. John Custis II had a son John Custis III who lived on another

plantation in Wilsonia Neck. John III had a son named John Custis IV who inherited Arlington and then moved to Williamsburg where he died in 1750.

About 1651 or 1652, John Custis II married the first of his three wives. Her name was Elizabeth, and, in the next year, they had a son, John Custis III. This is the only child known to have been born to John Custis. At this time, they were likely living in Old Town Neck on land leased to him by his brother-in-law Argoll Yardley. It appears that Elizabeth did not live long after the birth of John III. In 1656, John married his second wife, also a widow. Her name was Alice and she had already lost three husbands: George Travellor in 1643, William Burdett later in 1643 and Peter Walker in 1655.

In 1658 our John Custis purchased 500 acres from Mr. Thomas Burdett (son of his wife's second husband). This was the place where we are now standing. The next year, Custis bought another 300 acres, thereby making a total of 800.

What was John Custis like? Financially he was successful and had a privileged life. He was a planter, businessman, creditor, militia officer, county justice, Burgess, and member of the governor's council. He accumulated substantial wealth. He has been described as "ambitious, vain, arrogant, hot tempered & stubborn". The county records contain one reference to him as "King Custis".

In 1675 and 76 trouble was brewing in western parts of Virginia. Farmers and settlers in the colony had had enough of Governor William Berkeley and his handling of their "Indian problem". They felt he was too soft and easy. They took up arms under their leader, Nathaniel Bacon. Berkeley was forced to leave Jamestown and flee across the bay to Arlington on the Eastern Shore. The citizens here, not having the problems of those out west, were more likely to be loyal to the government. Arlington thus became the official seat of colonial government. John Custis was appointed Major General of the militia, and he was also appointed to the Governor's council.

John's second wife, Alice, died about this time though a direct record of her death has not been discovered. It is reasonable to believe she was buried here, possibly in an unmarked grave near the resting place of her last husband.

About 1680, John Custis married for the third time, another wealthy widow, Tabitha (Scarburgh) Smart-Browne. She was the daughter of the notorious Colonel Edmund Scarburgh and widow of John Smart and Devorax Browne.

John lived for another 16 years and died on January 29, 1696. His gravestone is still legible reading: Here lies the body of John Custis Esqr. one of the council and Major

General of Virginia who departed this life the 29th of January 1696, aged 66 and by his side a son and daughter of his grandson John Custis whom he had by the daughter of Daniel Parke Esqr Captain General and Chief Governor of the Leeward Islands.

John's son, John Custis III was already well established at his own plantation in Wilsonia Neck so Arlington was left to the eldest grandson, John Custis IV who was about 18 and living in England. He was sent there about 1690 to apprentice with a mercantile firm of Perry and Lane, who had been doing business with his grandfather for some time. Tabitha lost little time and married Mr. Edmund Hill of Charles City County.

John Custis IV returned to Virginia about 1699 and probably took up residence here at Arlington. Not a bad start for a young man just finishing his education. So here we have the young aristocrat, with a large plantation, one of the best houses in the colony, terribly rich and single.

In 1706 John IV married Miss Frances Parke. He was 27, she was 19, the daughter of Colonel Daniel Parke and Jane Ludwell Parke of Queen's Creek Plantation. This was on the York River not far from Williamsburg. Of course, this is the marriage that was famously quite rocky. They seem to be well suited before their wedding. A letter he wrote to her in 1705 begins with, "May angels guard my dearest Fidelia and deliver her safe to my arms at our next meeting etc. He ends with, "Pray think of me and believe that Veramour is entirely and eternally yours". Perhaps he was a man who did not know what he was getting into.

Her father, Daniel Parke was reportedly handsome, dashing, and brave but also quarrelsome, brash, self-centered, and egotistical, not to mention unfaithful to his wife. It seems that John's father, John III wrote a letter to Parke regarding his son's desire to marry. Parke responded with a letter saying essentially, well I do not know your son and neither he nor you have furnished me with any proof of his worth. But if my daughter likes him, I will consent and will give him half of what he can show that he is worth. Parke never followed through on his promise and John never saw a shilling.

Everyone knows that this Custis marriage was not that great. Knowing her father, Frances may have come by her disposition quite naturally. John on the other hand, may have inherited some qualities from his grandfather and may have been, as we would describe today, "a piece of work". It has been said it was fortunate they married each other. Otherwise, the lives of four people would have been miserable.

The first few years of their marriage were difficult. In the first two years, Frances gave birth to two children, a son and daughter, and both died within a short time. Tragic. These

two infants were buried along-side their great grandfather. In 1708, Jane Parke died leaving Frances without her mother, perhaps at a time when she was most needed. Her father, Daniel was then Governor of the Leeward Islands and never came back to Virginia. In 1711, having his own problems controlling his subjects, he was murdered by an angry mob. Although it appeared, he was quite wealthy, he was also saddled with considerable debt which plagued John and his brother-in-law, for years. Daniel's will also acknowledged and provided for two illegitimate children. It is easy to believe that Frances was emotionally traumatized.

John Custis was not the only man to suffer marriage with a daughter of Daniel Parke. Most people have heard of William Byrd of Westover plantation. He is famous for having kept a diary from the early 1700's which, among other things, mentions John and Frances Custis. You see, Frances was the sister of William's own wife, Lucy. William and John were brothers-in-law. There is a book titled, Inside the Great House, which discusses the marital relationships of William and Lucy and John and Frances. "The first thing that must be noted about the Byrd's is that they quarreled often – almost constantly it seems, concerning almost every subject, the treatment of children and servants, the extent of a husband's authority, wifely extravagance, assertiveness. Byrd noted in his diary in 1712, he had to pull a servant girl away from Lucy who was beating her. When Byrd interfered, Lucy threatened to strike him. She gave me an abundance of bad words & endeavored to strangle herself.

I used to envision John and Frances living here, unhappily, at Arlington for many years after their marriage. I was surprised to learn that was not at all the case. John had been elected to the house of burgesses in 1705, the year before their wedding. They spent most of their time in Williamsburg and at the Parke plantation on Queen's Creek.

There was one particular trip they made with the Byrds, and another couple to Arlington in 1709 and this was partially recorded in Byrd's diary. Apparently, they all had a terrible time and the Custis marriage was deteriorating.

Despite their problematic marriage, they did have a daughter Frances, born about 1709 and then a son, Daniel Parke Custis born in 1711. Nevertheless, the relationship went downhill until they were not even speaking. This resulted in a "Marital Agreement" which was drawn up in 1714. Frances was required to stop calling John "any vile names or give him any ill language" and "neither shall he give her any but to live lovingly together and to behave themselves to each other as good husband & wife ought to do."

However, within a few months, Frances died of the smallpox. She was only 29 and they had only been married for 8 years. She left two small children, ages about 5 and 3. She

was buried at her parent's home at Queen's Creek but then she was moved to Bruton's Parish Church where her gravestone can still be seen.

Two years later, her sister, Lucy Byrd also died from smallpox. About four years later, Byrd was living in London and Custis wrote to him saying, "because he had not heard from him, he thought him dead (or even worse) married."

Shortly before the death of his wife, John Custis began construction of a large townhouse on several acres in Williamsburg and he lived there for the next 35 years and developed what is thought to be one of the most elegant gardens in all of Virginia. That house is no longer standing but is now the site of an extensive excavation by Colonial Williamsburg.

A lot of people do not know that John Custis IV also had an out of wedlock child with an enslaved woman named Alice. It was a son named John but known as "Jack". The exact year of his birth is not known but I estimate it was between 1730 & 1735. He was about 20 years younger than his half-brother, Daniel Parke Custis. Young Jack, an enslaved person by the law of the time, was much favored by his father. In 1747, John Custis deeded to his son his own freedom and 200 acres of land in York County. He also gave him "my Negro woman Alice his mother with all her children or increase already born or to be born."

We know from the will of John Custis, there was a portrait of young Jack which was given to a family friend, Mrs. Ann Moody. Unfortunately, that portrait has been lost. John's will went on to say, "It is my will and desire that my said Negro boy John otherwise called Jack live with my son until he be twenty years of age. And that he be handsomely maintained out of the profits of my estate."

Unfortunately, young Jack did not live long after the death of his father. A Custis friend, Mr. John Blair, wrote these words in his diary on September 19, 1751, "about 1 or 2 in ye morning, Col Custis' favorite boy Jack died. He was taken ill a little before day the 18th with a pain in the back of his neck for which he was blooded."

John Custis loved Arlington enough to require that he be buried here, and he left very explicit instructions in his will.

His tombstone bears the famous inscription.

Under this marble tomb lies the body of the Honorable John Custis Esq of the City of Williamsburg and Parish of Bruton. Formerly of Hungars Parish on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and County of Northampton the place of his nativity. Aged 71 years and yet liv'd

but seven years which was the space of time he kept a bachelor's house at Arlington on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

Many consider this to be his final vindictive jab at his wife. However, if one inserts two commas, the last sentence reads differently. "Aged 71 years and yet liv'd but seven years (comma) which was the space of time he kept a bachelor's house at Arlington (comma) on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

There is another, alternative opinion regarding one of the famous stories of John and Frances. Apparently, two wheeled open carriages were not in use on the Eastern Shore in the early 1700s, making that famous story difficult to accept. There was another Custis couple, living about 1800, Dr. Thomas V. Custis and his wife Margaret Dixon. They also had an unhappy marriage, and the carriage ride story may actually be about them.

Following the death of John Custis IV, this property was inherited by his son Daniel Parke Custis who married Martha Dandridge. They had two children, but Daniel died in 1750 and Martha married George Washington. The property remained in the Custis family until 1835 when Martha and Daniel's grandson, George Washington Parke Custis sold to Mr. John Goffigon.

Daniel's grandson, George Washington Parke Custis built a second Arlington mansion on the banks of the Potomac, overlooking the new capital. His daughter married Robert E. Lee and their home is now Arlington National Cemetery.

Most people are not aware that George Washington Parke Custis had three sisters. One was named Martha and she had a granddaughter who married a young Naval officer by the name of John Henry Upshur. He was an Eastern Shoreman, born here in Northampton County at a home called "Selma" just north of Eastville.