

The Ballendine Canal
Colonial America's First Canal
by
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The history of canals in America began with the Indians who built canals to assist them in traveling by canoe. The next canal builders were the Pilgrims who built the first sea level canal called The Cut River Canal. This canal along the Massachusetts coast may have opened around 1636 and was about one mile long.¹ South Hadley Falls Canal on the Connecticut River in Massachusetts was the first canal built using an incline plane instead of locks and was opened in April of 1795.² The first summit level canal, a canal crossing a summit between two watersheds, belongs to the Santee & Cooper Canal in South Carolina. That canal was started in 1793 and was completed in 1800.³

Over the last fifteen years I have been interested in the history of the Potomac watershed as a road west in eighteenth-century America. While doing research on this subject the name John Ballendine came to the surface and just as quickly sank into the muddy river of history. Most historians contend that he had a part in this tale of the road west, but he was not the class of man you could hang a story on because of the things said about his integrity. It seems John Ballendine is famous for his failure rather than for his success. Actually, his reputation is remembered due to the hostile and demeaning things that were written by two men: John Tayloe and George Johnston. Could these men be wrong about what they wrote and can we find the truth?

John Ballendine was the first canal builder in Colonial America to overcome a waterfall by using by-pass and sluice canals. Using his own funds, Ballendine accomplished this between 1767 and 1772 and operated the canal as a private company.

Who was John Ballendine? Some authors have written about his life and work. In 1826 George Armoryd printed Ballendine's proposal for the Potomac in his book

The Whole Internal Navigation of the United States.⁴ The first author to write about Ballendine was Mrs. Corra Bacon-Foster in 1912, The Patomack Route to the West,⁵ where she devoted seven pages to Ballendine's plan from 1772 until 1784. Most of that space is taken up with quotations from newspaper articles and letters. Fairfax Harrison wrote Landmarks of Old Prince William.⁶ Harrison devoted one chapter to Ballendine's work in Occoquan and another chapter called *Failure of the Waterways* has information about Ballendine. Randolph W. Church wrote an article for the Virginia Cavalcade entitled John Ballendine Unsuccessful Entrepreneur of the Eighteenth Century.⁷ Arthur G. Burton and Richard W. Stephenson wrote an article for The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress John Ballendine's Eighteenth Century Map of Virginia.⁸ Laura Croghan Kamoie wrote about Ballendine being a thorn in the side of John Tayloe's struggle to control the Iron industry of the northern neck of Virginia in a book entitled Neabsco and Occoquan: the Tayloe Family Iron Plantations, 1730-1830.⁹ Robert J. Kapsch recently published The Potomac Canal: George Washington and the Waterway West.¹⁰ This book shows an excellent understanding of the difference between the plan written by John Semple in 1769 and the one written by in 1773 John Ballendine.

Most of these writers left the reader with the impression that John Ballendine did not succeed as an entrepreneur or canal builder. Randolph W. Church was right; Ballendine was not a successful entrepreneur as we measure success today. Church noted that one problem was the center of John's troubles.

The facts show that he could secure no approval from the Maryland legislature for work on the Potomac, which river lay in that state's jurisdiction.¹¹ In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, George Washington was correct when he wrote that ...the difficulties which were met with in the Maryland Assembly, from the opposition which was given (according to report) by the Baltimore Merchants, who were alarmed, and perhaps not without cause, at the consequence of water transportation to George Town of the produce which usually came to their market.¹²

Bureton and Stephenson got it right. They said it all in the final paragraph of their article:

A man whose “genius” Washington admired, Ballendine has generally been ignored by the writers of history or simply regarded “like many a man of vision a failure.” Though he failed, his were the first serious attempts to improve the Potomac and the James. Even under the impetus of a rapidly expanding West, similar ventures of a later date also fell short of success. His map survives as a reminder of the rugged individualism that helped to open the West and mold a Nation.¹³

What kind of man was John Ballendine? He was a hard working Lowlander Scotsman who was generous, honest, and humble. I believe that if a person met him on the street and asked, “Are you Mr. Ballendine?” His answer would have been, “No. That was my Father. My name is John.”

A major problem with this research involves Benedict Arnold and his raid on Richmond Virginia on January 1, 1781 where John Ballendine and John Reveley built a furnace, foundry and shops in Buckingham County. This complex was destroyed and It is likely that the papers of these men where burned and therefore lost to history. As you will read in this writing a man who accomplished so much must have had a large collection of information in his possession.

The muddy waters of history became clearer when I visited the only place where you could find physical evidence of John Ballendine’s life, Occoquan, Virginia. My trip to the city of Occoquan encouraged me to find out if history had the story straight. What I saw was a mill built by John Ballendine that is currently called Ellicott’s Mill. Nathaniel Ellicott bought Ballendine’s mill in 1800 and modified it to become the first automated mill in America. There remains a beautiful house called Rockledge that was designed by Architect William Buckland for John and his wife. The street in front of Rockledge was named Ellicott’s Street. Once Ellicott bought the mill complex, John Ballendine became a footnote in Occoquan history. When I find this treatment of history, one thing becomes clear; this man left no grandchildren to guard the family reputation.

John Ballendine’s story starts on the Potomac River and ends on the James River. I invite you to take an imaginary trip on the Potomac River young Ballendine: We have made one more successful trip down the Potomac and Widow Brewster’s

landing is in sight. The boat is loaded with barrels of flour and some beautiful fur pelts; we only lost one barrel of flour at Seneca Falls. It is time to bargain with the merchants on price, hoping that there will be more than one bidder or we will have to wait a couple of days for more to come. Two days and only one bidder here, we will have to take his offer, besides we have had our quota of whiskey. The season is getting late for travel on the river and we must go. The boat is packed for the trip up river with as many goods as we can afford for the settlers. We push off at first light for our eight-day trip up river. There will be times when we will be poling our boat on the wide expanse of this majestic river. At other times, we will come to a narrow pass where the water forms channels of rapidly flowing water around large boulders. We will be required to break out the long ropes and leave the boat, save one man to steer. We will then pull the boat until it seems our hands and feet will fall off from exposure to the cold water. It is late September and this will be the last trip before the ice sets in, hoping we can get home with the boat for the winter. If not, the trip home will be much longer and instead of looking for dangerous swift water and boulders for days, the ride on horseback will be long and cold as we avoid Indians and washed out muddy trails.

The men known to history for opening the Potomac to navigation never brought grain and furs down river. These men were surveyors and leaders of our country. They rode either a horse or a coach up river and then drifted down in a canoe with no cargo and portaged when things got difficult. These leaders and surveyors viewed the Potomac as a never-ending supply of water that would bring them a cornucopia of fruits from the farmers and trappers of the Potomac and Shenandoah Valleys. They were not the men transporting goods on the river who were already working to make the river a highway to the west. John Ballendine was a man with friends in both camps. He listened to and advised the rich plantation owners and land speculators while continuing a close relationship with the men who carried on the work of shipping goods on the river.

Ballendine's ties to the Potomac dated to the early 1740's, when he was a young man getting started on the Potomac River.¹⁴ This hard-working Scotsman worked the river for fifteen years.¹⁵ More than likely, he was the John Ballendine who transported

supplies on that river for the Braddock expedition of 1755. If so, his interest in transportation and shipping came from practice in these fields.¹⁶

There were two types of boaters on the fresh water Potomac. Those who brought their own goods down the river as far as Seneca Falls or Widow Brewster's landing, sold their goods to a merchant and hoped to trade their rafts for a horse strong enough to get them home and work the farm when spring comes. And there were the commercial boaters who had very substantial boats called bateau or packet boats. John Ballendine called his boat a packet boat, which indicated he carried passengers as well as cargo. He was the son of William Ballendine, a ship's captain who transported tobacco to England and ported in Lancaster. William married Mary Ann Ewell on December 16, 1724.¹⁷

At some point in 1755, Ballendine decided to exploit the growing trade on the Potomac as a manufacturer and planter, so he acquired land near the Occoquan River. Previous to this move, John married the daughter of Colonel Richard Blackburn and had a son, Thomas William. John and his wife Mary bought 280 acres of land from her uncle, Charles Ewell who was a plantation owner in the northern neck of Virginia. In 1749, Ewell had planned to establish an iron works in the vicinity of the Occoquan. Ralph Faker, Edward Neal, and John Triplett backed him. They purchased 1,520 acres of ore lands on Hoe's Run, but apparently were unable to exploit the land for the property remained undeveloped until February 1755 when 280 acres of the parcel were acquired by John and Mary Ballendine. Ballendine's contracts of 1755 with Ewell and Payton declared that his purpose was to erect and operate an iron furnace, forge, and gristmill on the Occoquan.¹⁸ What did John do to convince Charles Ewell to believe John could build and operate an iron furnace and mill? An interesting question we may never have an answer to.

Ballendine's shift to land-based enterprises may have been spurred by his difficulty in collecting debts from his operations on the river. In January of 1754 the Fairfax County Court heard the case of *William Scott vs. John Ballendine, John King, and Will Gladdin*. King and Gladdin were probably partners and part of Ballendine's boat crew. The following summary of a court case is an example of how the finance system of debits and credits worked in the colonies. William Scott was the surveyor of

Church Road. This means he was the person who looked after the condition of that road. In May, the court removed him from this job. In September, Ballendine, King, and Gladdin were awarded ten pounds four shillings plus court cost and Scott was imprisoned for insolvency. Scott took an oath of insolvency and delivered an inventory of his estate as required by the court. This court case for Ballendine and his crew was one of twenty-three cases of debt against John Scott. In November, after the satisfaction of these debts, Scott was released from prison.¹⁹

The idea was that when your debit was more than your creditors thought you could pay, the creditors would take you to court. Many times, the creditors were wrong and the judge would set a judgment against the creditor/plaintiff and hope the parties would work things out. But, if the creditor could prove insolvency, the Judge would send the debtor to jail unless someone could and would secure the bond for him. In 1833, the federal government eliminated this practice except for debts of fraud, child-support, etc.²⁰ In this day and age we do not have to go to debtor's prison we just declare bankruptcy.

The way to avoid debtor's prison was to diversify. A merchant would ship goods to England in several different ships thereby ensuring that all his commodities would not be lost if one or more of the ships were lost at sea. The merchant could also produce goods in the colonies. These goods could be bartered for their immediate needs while waiting for the credit from the sale of his merchandise in England.

Ballendine was following a good business model, diversifying his operations by building a grain mill, baking bread for ships' crews, running a sawmill, an iron furnace, an iron forge, and adding a fishing component. What got him close to being insolvent was speculating in land and investing in building a canal. John had the same problem experienced by later investors of canals did. The cost of building a canal has never been where the profit is. It takes a lot of up-front money before you can begin to gain profits from a canal.

By May of 1756 John had built a mill and requested from the court permission to build a road from Ox Road to his mill.²¹ Sometime before this date, he formed a partnership with John Taylor and John Thornton to erect and carry-on an iron works on the Occoquan. The partnership added Valentine Payton's tobacco warehouse to their

holdings²². By this time, the town of Dumfries had succeeded in capturing the tobacco trade from Payton's warehouse. Silt deposited in the Occoquan River closed navigation to the warehouse and ships could no longer dock there. Tayloe and Ballendine soon quarreled over Ballendine's failure to repair the warehouse and Tayloe sued. Not only did he sue on this occasion, but many more times. Years after Ballendine's death, he sued Thomas, John's son, to repair the warehouse. Repairing the warehouse must have been part of the contract with Tayloe and Thornton.²³ In November of 1756, Tayloe and Thornton announced in the Virginia Gazette, "John Ballendine is no longer agent for their Furnace at Occoquan," and the public was advised "not [to] trust him on their account." This partnership would not expire until May 27, 1769.

Despite his quarrels with Tayloe and Thornton, Ballendine expanded his work as an iron maker and manufacturer. In June of 1757 Ballendine received a land grant from Lord Fairfax for twenty acres.²⁴ The Virginia land deeds stipulated that Lord Fairfax retained mineral rights to one-third of all lead, copper, tin, coal, and iron ore mined. This caused the ironmongers of the northern neck to import iron ore from Maryland. These twenty acres were between the lands of Charles Ewell and Valentine Payton on the Occoquan and across the river from the 280 acres Ballendine had previously purchased. This land was situated so that Ballendine could take advantage of the falls. John Ballendine established his residence on the twenty acres and proceeded to erect a forge, gristmills, bolting mills, bake houses, saw mills, storehouses, and dwellings. A survey on February 6, 1758, by John Westlin and requested by John Ballendine, showed that he set aside 9 acres 2 rods 7 perches of the twenty acres that he called "The Mill Tract," 79 acres 0 rods 32 perches plus 15 acres 1 rod 11 perches of vacant land that he called "The Furnace Tract," and 282 acres that bordered Valentine Payton, his father-in-law Col. Richard Blackburn, and Roberson's land for a total of 385 acres 3 rods 50 perches. This survey also showed the location of Valentine Payton's warehouse on the Occoquan River.²⁵

Ballendine's ironworks attracted the attention of a young George Washington, who wrote him in April of 1758 asking for two tons of one-inch bars and one ton of three-inch broad by ½ inch thick iron bars. "Be please therefore to send the whole or part thereof to this place without delay. Dispatch in this will encourage me to contract

with you for iron on future occasions. Mr. Smith has written to you for iron one or twice before and received none; pray write me word how far we may depend on you now? I entreat that you will not disappoint us.”²⁶ This request to purchase iron was for the building of Fort Loudon. Washington was in charge of Virginia’s frontier defense at this time.

In August, John Patterson sent a letter to George Washington to tell him that he had sent an order to John Ballendine for planking and could not get any to finish a floor at Mount Vernon. He said he had “no dependence on [Ballendine’s] word.” In September, Washington’s building contractor wrote Washington to tell him “[a]s there is no dependence on Mr. Ballendine, I shall endeavor to get Plank for the Floors elsewhere...”²⁷ By May of that year, Ballendine wrote to Tayloe not to promise any more oak plank as the demand there was so great. “I can venture to tell you I could sell from our own landing four times as much as our mill can saw.”²⁸ Was it John Tayloe who was promising the plank and iron and not Ballendine?

In June of 1758 Ballendine once again asked the Fairfax County Court to clear the road from his ford to Ox Road and proposed a road from Ox Road to his mill.²⁹ This is a sign of John Ballendine’s continued expansion.

Ballendine continually sought to integrate his manufacturing activities with commerce on the Potomac. Sometime in 1759 Ballendine provided 52 ½ feet of one-inch oak plank for a raft named Golgotha. The raft belonged to a Mr. Henderson in Colchester who leased it to Benjamin Grayson who was a baker from Dumfries, Ballendine, and other merchants in the area. John Ballendine thus used his sawmill to obtain a foothold in the business of shipping in the Potomac. This raft was needed because of the continual silting of the Occoquan River and it was now the only way to reach the warehouse by water.³⁰

But Ballendine continued to face problems with supplying his customers to their satisfaction. A notation in George Washington’s diary on January 8, 1760, called for an indictment to be formed by Mr. Johnson against John Ballendine because Washington had been shorted some iron that Ballendine sold him.³¹ The message got to the lawyer very quickly because George Johnson wrote to George Washington the same day saying,

It is said to be some Alleviation to a Man in Misfortune to have another under the same circu[m]stance with himself and this I believe is a Pleasure which some people feel though perhaps directly contrary to the Dictates of Sense, and I am sure extremely opposite to the Principals of Christianity, This Ballendine that you write about seems lately to have convinced you of his prodigious Abilit[ys] in the Art of being a Villain and let me tell you, it [illegible] favour that you came so lately in, for he hath long agoe given Demonstration in a thousand Instances to other people (& Amongst the rest to me) of his superior Talents in that Commendable Science Once I punished him severely, but it had no effect upon him, I shall again in your Case endeavor to make an Example of him, but to mend his Morals I altogether despair, for he that hath lost all source of honesty & Virtue (as Ballendine undoubtedly hath) neither Exhortations or punishments will produce any other Effects than to make him cheat with greater Art & Circumspection I doubt I cannot be able to get him arrested to the next Court and to Issue a writ & have a return non est would be expensive however I shall take all imaginable Care to have it done as soon as possible upon this Supposition that you have paid him for the two Ton of Iron, if you did not I would advise you to let him alone and content yourself with paying him for what you have. For tho' you may have a secret Pleasure in punishing a Villain & Dragging him Out to public Justice to shew the World the Lurking Scoundrel, yet in his Case you make no Discovery, for most people knew him before. I am Sir Your very Humble Sert G. Johnston.³²

Ballendine tried unsuccessfully to avoid another lawsuit that might adversely affect his reputation and his credit-worthiness. On January 24, 1760, John Ballendine wrote to George Washington to explain how the shortage happened. He wrote that his overseer had been down country at Christmas. When the overseer returned, he sent the iron that was on the loading dock, thinking that it had already been weighed. Neither he nor his overseer intended to send a short supply of iron to Washington and hoped that George would not think that he would be guilty of such a crime. Then in postscript he stated that the recent order for one ton of iron by Derby Pendergrass

would be changed to two tons.”³³ The case was brought to court on February 19, 1760, and again on the June 18, 1760. Both times the case was dismissed.³⁴

The disputes with Tayloe and Washington had in fact damaged Ballendine’s standing among the planters. The Fairfax County Minute Book shows that in 1761 there were as many as thirty-four cases of debt filed against John Ballendine, though few made it to trial. This large number of cases has lead many historians to think that Ballendine was close to insolvency. These cases could also have been frivolous lawsuits brought by Johnston and Tayloe’s friends in order to cause his real creditors to call in their debts fearing that Ballendine was close to insolvency.

As 1761 drew to a close, Ballendine began to reconsider his situation, with a view to bringing in a partner for his interests on the Occoquan. In seven years, John had built several iron furnaces, two iron forges, two saw mills, a gristmill with four pairs of stones, as well as a bake house with a copper shop and storehouse. A dairy, storage cellar, granary cellar, and slave quarter also existed on the property on Mourns Creek. Ballendine’s company also owned several teams of horses, cattle, oxen, and pigs. Despite their disputes, Ballendine also built a forge for Tayloe and Thorton.³⁵

John had a house built for his family by William Buckland that was called Rockledge. This house not only had room for his family, but also for the people who worked for him. The house had eleven furnished rooms. A central hall included a walnut table large enough to seat twelve diners. Table settings included china bowls, teapots, coffee cups, stoneware plates, wine glasses, a brass candlestick, knives, and forks.³⁶

These achievements notwithstanding, John decided to work on the Potomac and had plans to construct a by-pass canal around Seneca Falls. Seneca Falls is the first major obstacle to navigation when descending the Potomac River. A by-pass at this point would bring all descending traffic to the entrance of Great Falls and consolidate the transfer of goods plus shorten the land mileage by a day of travel. Once completed he would be able to move to Little Falls and build a canal there with locks to shorten the land travel even more. In the next year John brought new partners into the enterprise to help him shift the workload so he could go back to the work he loved.

On January 26, 1762, Ballendine formed a partnership with Benjamin Grayson for producing wheat and baking bread at the falls of Occoquan for ten years. This would give him more time to work on the by-pass at Seneca Falls. Benjamin Grayson was a baker from the town of Colchester near the mouth of the Occoquan. It was normal for ships to load between 1,000 to 1,500 loaves of bread for each trip. The partnership gave Benjamin one half part of the water gristmills with four pairs of stones, the bake house, a copper shop, and store house. The stream was never to be stopped on any occasion whatsoever because of any works built or to be built in the future. Most importantly, the water could not be diverted from the new forge owned with Tayloe and Thornton. That Grayson was to enjoy one half of the profit from two forges & two sawmills with all the cut planks on hand. The John Ballendine likewise obliging himself to put the said mills and forges in good repair for carrying on the work. Nothing in the agreement would affect the partnership with Tayloe and Thornton which did not expire until May 27, 1769. Benjamin Grayson allowed John Ballendine to use a fishery named Cooker Bay for ten years. In the agreement, Grayson's horse was allowed a sufficient supply of bran made by the mills. Within this document there is another agreement between Philip Sankfit, Grayson, and Ballendine. Philip was a cooper and promised that he and his son would make barrels for the mill for the period of five years.³⁷ This partnership lasted only a few months before Grayson withdrew because of his increasing indebtedness with various Glasgow creditors. Ballendine continued to look for someone to share the work at Occoquan.

On the November 25, 1761, Tayloe and Thornton made another attempt to discredit John Ballendine with another complaint to the court. Thomas Lawson, manager for Tayloe and Thornton, Esquires, at their works at Occoquan, suspected that John and his servants would embezzle future partners. Lawson wanted the court to order John Ballendine to remain in the sheriff's custody till he posted sureties in the amount of 360 pounds payable to the King.

In the court papers filed, Lawson required that Ballendine admit to all of his debts and "shall orderly demeaner himself and be of good behavior to all his majesties subjects for a year and a day more especially to Thomas Lawson gentleman." The next day of court, the case of *Lawson vs. Ballendine* was dismissed. That same day,

Matthew Gregg, orphan of John Gregg, deceased, came into court and chose John Ballendine to be his Guardian. Ballendine, William Else, and Bertrand Ewell entered into and executed a bond for the faithful performance of the same.³⁸

During the next three months, John was still trying to get a road to one of his mills on the north side of the river. In February he petitioned the court to build a road to his mill on Ox Road. In March, the court appointed a person to view the road but he never arrived. April brought a decision that tells why he had so much trouble getting a road to his mill. The petition for a road would cut through Colonel Tayloe's pasture to Ballendine's mill and Colonel Tayloe was not going to let that happen. The court dismissed the petition for lack of a report.³⁹

Not being one to give up, John became acquainted with John Semple of Charles County in the Province of Maryland. Ballendine was still hoping to find a partner who would share the work at Occoquan and bring a new supply of capital. Semple had come to Maryland in 1750 as a resident partner in the firm of Jamieson, Semple, and Lawson. James Jamieson left the firm in 1754, and Semple and Lawson formed a new partnership, Lawson and Semple. Semple's headquarters was in Port Tobacco, Charles County, Maryland. By 1760 he had additional stores at Alexandria, Virginia, and Leonardtown, Maryland. This tobacco company was in trouble at this time and the partnership was looking for another stream of revenue. In 1759 he proposed the firm engage in the slave trade and sell blacks in Maryland. They could not find a London merchant to back what had become, by that time, a Liverpool trade.⁴⁰ It was time for Semple to look out for his own business.

On April 29, 1762, John Ballendine formed a partnership with John Semple. This partnership would further diversify Ballendine's holdings and give him the time he wanted to work on the river. John Semple was to become an important part of the Potomac story and his Scottish idea of private investment became part of the finance picture. He and Ballendine would share ideas for the next ten years about the possibility of moving the iron business further west. The terms of their agreement were extensive.

The first order of the agreement was an advance for John Ballendine 500 pounds sterling and 1,033 pounds 5 shillings 6 pence sterling to John Tayloe and Presley Thornton, Esquires, for a debt John owed them.

The second order was that the agreement was to last for a period of twelve years and that John Ballendine would continue to manage the workmen for the yearly salary of 100 pounds sterling and the use of his house and gardens for no rent plus one half of the profit. The partnership is not permitted to divert the stream of water leading to the forges and mills already built.

The third order involved the vending of goods to and from the European West Indies and a storehouse for the merchandise. It was clearly set forth that they are not joint tenants to be subject to the law of joint tenancy but were tenants in common. The agreement also states that John Semple could set apart on any part of the land, a yard for building ships or other vessels and cut, carry away, and use any wood for shipbuilding or other use at his discretion. The 10-page agreement included a mortgage of ten thousand pounds to each other and a complete inventory of Ballendine's works, which gives a clear picture of the complexity of John's skills and abilities.⁴¹

The agreements and partnerships in Occoquan are complex but it is easy to see one thing upon examination, that John Ballendine did everything he could to accommodate Tayloe and Thornton. As late as 1766 Tayloe warned the public about the status of the works and their situation:

“LEST any persons inclined to purchase the lands and works on Occoquan River . . . and to prevent any pretence of ignorance of our right and claim thereto, we are induced to advise the public that there is now of record in the Secretary's Office of this colony articles of agreement made between the said Ballendine and us, for the conveyance of the said land and works, where we were forthwith put in possession of.” Anticipating further trouble from Semple, the pair cautioned *Virginia Gazette* readers, “If any will purchase of the said Semple after this notice, they will do it with their eyes open, and must stand to the consequences, as we are determined to assert our rights.”⁴²

It seems to me that if Tayloe had any hard evidence of these assertions, his attorney, George Johnston, would have been brought the allegations before the court. After the death of John Semple in 1789, the Semple family still had control of the land and advertised the estate of sale. It seems that the work of Tayloe and Johnston to

discredit Ballendine took more of a toll on history and historians than it harmed either Semple or Ballendine during their lifetimes.

It was now time for Ballendine to either make a commitment to the river or stay in Occoquan. On 17 June 1762, John Ballendine sold his land at Occoquan to John Semple. The documents say nothing about Ballendine working or managing the works so it seems that this sale freed him to do the work he really wanted to do which was the by-pass canal at Seneca Falls. What John actually needed was time to work on the by-pass as well as an infusion of cash to reduce his debt and money for capital expenditures.

In Ballendine's sale to Semple, Semple agreed to pay Ballendine 1,333 pounds 6 shilling and 8 pence for his part of the profit from April of 1762 to January of 1765 and 100 pounds for the stock, current money of Virginia, at the sealing of the agreement. Semple paid 10,500 in the following manner for the fee simple estate: 500 pounds immediately and 500 pounds yearly on the first of January.

John Semple agreed to pay Phil Ludwell Esquire 10,500 pounds in payments of 500 pounds annually for a debt owed by John Ballendine.

They also agreed that John Semple's "agent's managers and servants shall pass with his vessels or craft through the locks or passages which John Ballendine shall make through or around Seneca Falls".

They agreed to allow John Ballendine to build a storehouse on some part of the channel to be made and opened at the Great Fall of the Potomac for no rent in exchange for John Semple to erect a storehouse at Little Falls on any lot except the mill lot without rent.

They also agreed to not take advantage of the penalty of 10,000 pounds for not finishing the Shenandoah furnace on time provided that John Ballendine make good the deficiency in a reasonable time and this he did.⁴³

In July, John Ballendine was granted a license to keep an ordinary (tavern) at his house. There were four debt cases set to come before the court and Ballendine lost three of them for total loss of about 28 pounds.⁴⁴

So after much success in the Occoquan works and so much trouble with John Tayloe and George Johnston, and with new adventures and opportunities on the

Potomac, it is no wonder that Ballendine and Semple started to buy land up the river as far west as the Opeckin Creek. This creek runs just east of Martinsburg West Virginia. Each one of the tracts had what seemed to be large deposits of high quality iron ore

In preparing to expand his iron works, John Semple bought 1,675 acres bordering on the Potomac and the Shenandoah next to a tract belonging to Robert Harper on Elk Run in June of 1763. This land is at the confluence of the Shenandoah and the Potomac where the federal government built an arsenal. It was later on this tract John Ballendine would build a furnace for Semple called Keep Tryst Furnace. Keep Tryst is the motto of Semple's lowlander Scottish family that means, "Keep the trust."⁴⁵

At the same time, Ballendine started his work at Seneca Falls. In June of 1763 he purchased from Samson Romeoville four slaves named Sam, Will, Ned, and Sarah along with a large black horse known as Peddler that belonged to Major Charles Broadwater. He rented land on Sugar Land Island from Daniel McCarty. There was also 150 acres at Seneca Falls that he rented from Bryan Fairfax. This land was between Mr. McCarty's Sugar Land tract and west of a tract called Difficult. Ballendine listed two sons at this time as heirs, Thomas William and Richard Henry. Fairfax required him to build a house at least sixteen feet square with a good fence, plant one hundred apple trees and one hundred peach trees. For being allowed to tend tobacco on this land he had to deliver on the first of December every year to Towson, at Bryan Fairfax's mansion house, two fat turkeys and six fat ducks.⁴⁶

Still working on the Fairfax story

In August of 1764, John Ballendine requested a road from his mill at Seneca Falls landing to, or near to, the mouth of Difficult Run. Charles Broadwater, James Jenkins, Franklin Perry and William Shortridge were to view the proposed site for the roadway and report back to the court.⁴⁷ This road would facilitate the land by-pass until the by-pass canal was finished and allow easier access to the mill.

While Ballendine and his family were working at Seneca Falls, John Semple was making an agreement with Samuel Beal of Frederick County and David Ross of Prince Georges County. Semple wanted to control the up river iron just as John Tayloe was dominating the iron trade in the northern neck of Virginia.

John Semple gave the Beal & Ross partnership the 10,216 acres of land that he had been buying. He would supply whatever pig iron they may want to work at their forge for the same rate it is sold for at the works on the Potomac.

Beal, Ross and Company agreed to give up all of their positions at Shenandoah Falls to John Semple except for enough land to build a large storehouse and a yard near the water. The agreement stated that if problems arose, independent arbitrators would settle the disputes.⁴⁸

In June 1764 Samuel Beall and John Semple agreed to build a road on the Maryland side of the river from the mouth of Antietam to Shenandoah Falls no more than 20 feet wide and could not obstruct the navigation of the river. This road was for the use of all persons whatever to pass and repass with any manner of carriage and that the said road shall be deemed and taken as a public main road forever.⁴⁹ The C & O Canal later took up this road.

The lack of capital came up again, on October 5 1764 John Ballendine owed James Douglas 465 pounds 15 shillings and did not have the money to pay, so he mortgaged land belonging to John Semple.⁵⁰ Some historians have misunderstood this document as a sale of property he did not own, but it was put up as collateral for a debit. Ballendine must have had the permission of John Semple because they worked together for many more years.

An opportunity came early during the project at Seneca Falls for Ballendine to buy a piece of land for a good price. This purchase took capital away from the building of the dam, but land at Great Falls and Little Falls was at a premium and the opportunity for this investment could not be lost. In April 1765, Rob Adam, Sheriff of Fairfax County, sold to John Ballendine 240 acres near the lower falls of the Potomac River adjoining Ludwell Lee's land. Ballendine also received a grant of 264 acres at Great Falls.⁵¹

In October of 1765 John Semple filed an amendment to the contract with Beall and Ross. It seems that Beall and Ross decided to build a furnace. At this point, it was still not known if Semple had built his furnace on a high quality ore bank or if this would prove to be another low yield track of iron ore.

The amendment sets forth that Keeptryst Furnace in Frederick County, Virginia, will supply the Antietam Forge with 300 tons of pig iron yearly. This pig iron will be delivered by water carriage on the Potomac River and will not be required to send it by land carriage. It also stated that Beall, Ross and Company must give a two-year notice to Semple before building a furnace.

Semple failed to produce the 300 tons of pig iron that he agreed to supply. In the ensuing dispute, the arbitrators awarded everything to Beall and Ross. It is interesting to note that the Keep Tryst Furnace continued to provide an adequate supply of pig iron until the iron ore in that area ran out.⁵²

Back at Seneca Falls John Ballendine, and his workers were in the last stages of the work on the Seneca bypass Canal. John Ballendine listed his rented property and slaves in the Tithables and Land Record for the year of 1766. This record shows he was renting 4,175 acres at McCarty's Quarter, which is below the mouth of Sugarland Run and 4,000 acres at Seneca Falls. The record also indicates that Ballendine had slaves working in three places with an overseer at each location. Overseer John Muffit was working ten slaves at the channel on the south side of Sugarland Island. Overseer John Gallahue was working ten slaves near Sugarland Run and the Potomac Ridge Road. Overseer John Melaley was working five slaves at Seneca Falls.⁵³

I believe that by May of 1767 I believe that Ballendine had finished the by-pass around Seneca Falls because he sold to Hector Ross "forty-one slaves, eight wagons, equipment, and thirty-two mares that usually work the said wagons".⁵⁴ Some have thought that this sale meant that John was out of money, but now that the boats could pass through Seneca he did not need that many wagons and slaves. This was another indication that he was moving his operation to Little Falls where he would build the important canal that would connect the fresh water Potomac with the Salt water Potomac on the 160 acres of land that he purchased from William Cummings and James Edmondson who received it as a Patent called Amsterdam from Maryland in 1732.⁵⁵ We do not know when he purchased this land because as on other occasions he failed to register the sale. We do know that in June of 1761 Ballendine allowed Semple to build a warehouse on any lot but the mill lot at Little Falls⁵⁶. We also know that his son sold the 160 acres to Abner Could on the April 29, 1788.⁵⁷

This move in no way meant that John was giving up on the profitable work in Loudoun County. He still had a mill and maintenance of the by-pass plus plantations to run. In 1768 he listed 44 slaves and 3 overseers. In 1769 there were 31 slaves and three overseers. As late as 1775 Ballendine advertised in the Virginia Gazette the sale of his lease of 12 Plantations and 150 slaves that he held in Loudoun County in order to use the money for work on the canal at Richmond.

In the fall of 1769 John Semple wrote a proposal for opening the navigation of the Potomac and suggested they could use the dam that Ballendine built across the river to feed more water into a natural channel between a chain of islands and the main river. He also proposed that the legislature should interpose and prevent John Ballendine from executing his plan to build a sawmill and other works on that channel. Semple also suggested that they move the dams that Ballendine built in order feed more water into a natural channel between a chain of islands in the main river and thereby making the canal shorter.⁵⁸

John Ballendine had a strong commitment to social justice and worked just as hard to establish his family into the social life of the northern neck. In November of 1768 John Ballendine paid a condemnation to the court for David Davis so that Davis would not go to jail for insolvency. In July of 1769 did something that shows that he had no animosity about the things Tayloe and Johnston had done to ruin his reputation. George Johnston had died and left his family with a court case of insolvency. John came to the aid of the family with a bond that kept them from going to jail.⁵⁹

Ballendine's only claim to fame was that he was the son of a Scottish lowlander who was a Captain of a tobacco ship. Ballendine and his sister were frequent visitors at Mount Vernon. It was not just that they were mentioned in Washington's diary but whom they were with at Mr. Vernon with that gives us a clear picture of their social standing. Frances Ballendine came with Lord Fairfax and Lady Fairfax on one occasion and Colonel Henry Lee and his wife Lady Lee on another when they stayed for dinner and spent the night there. On February 8, 1770, Captain McCarty, Doctor Rumney, and Mr. John Ballendine dined at Mount Vernon and the next day went fox hunting, found a fox and lost it. The following day Washington and Ballendine surveyed Doeg Run in order to fix a new location for one of George Washington's mills. John

Ballendine spent 4 days helping Washington with the relocation of the mill on Doeg Run.⁶⁰

The ever-dark cloud of debt that all entrepreneurs of the Colonial era feared was on the horizon again. John and his family had moved to Little Falls on 160 acres of land he bought from William Cummings and James Edmondston called Amsterdam. On April 16 and 17 of 1770 John Ballendine went to court facing thirty-two lawsuits for debt, three of which were dismissed. The judge sentenced him to jail for insolvency, but his lawyer William Ellzey posted a bail so he was not imprisoned.⁶¹ In his diary, George Washington wrote that he was there for the trial. By June, John had sold the land he purchased from Benjamin Grayson in order to satisfy some of his creditors. One hundred acres was sold to Thomas Drake and 2,050 acres near the Blue Ridge to Edward Snichers.

On December 10, 1770, George Washington wrote in his diary:

Went up to the Little Falls to Ballendine's sale. Returned in the evening. John was attempting to satisfy his creditors by leasing his enterprises at the Falls and selling much of his other property, including about 100 hogsheads of tobacco, a large amount of wheat and corn, 50 head of sheep, one set each of blacksmith and cooper's tools, some household furniture, 1,049 acres of land in Prince William County, and 91 acres in Fauquier County. However, he did not succeed in selling everything on this day, nor did all his creditors appear at the Falls today to settle their accounts as he had requested, and a second sale and meeting for the creditors had to be called for May 16 1771.⁶²

This trip by George Washington speaks volumes for the reputation of John Ballendine. The fact that few people came to the sale indicates that the community had faith in John's ability to work his way out of this difficult problem and respected him enough to not take advantage of a debit sale. For George Washington to recognize this in his diary was amazing.

Ballendine was doing everything he could to make a living in this difficult financial climate of the late colonial period. Ballendine leased land on the Virginia side of the Potomac below Great Falls from Lee at a place called the meadows and built a warehouse for storing goods purchased at Widow Brewster's just above Great Falls.

The main reason to move to Little Falls was to build a canal. George Washington said that Ballendine started a canal but did not finish it. If he started a canal Ballendine would have to build a diversion dam to place water in the canal. It would make sense to bring the water at least to the place called Lock Cove where there was enough fall to operate a mill. This is where he built the following structures, even if he did not build the locks.

Ballendine built a mill that was capable of grinding 50,000 bushels of wheat a year, a bakery by the rapids, a public house with 11 fireplaces and a fine French cook, a landing for large vessels complete with granaries, counting houses and his home.⁶³

By 1772, John Ballendine was selling lots in a town that he laid out called Philee on the southwest side of the Potomac River bellow Great Falls so he could acquire more capital for the canal.

John Ballendine sold one of these lots to Richard Thompson and Thomas Magruder Part of the land is was laid off into lots for the town by said John Ballendine and was called Philee on the southwest side of the Potomac River. John Ballendine rented this land from Philip Ludwell Lee, Esquire, with the understanding that for every lot rented for 30 pounds current money of Virginia, seven shilling's and six pence would go to Lee. The Thompson and Magrudger lot was on St. Johns Street and was 132 feet by 198 feet.⁶⁴

In May of 1772, John Ballendine met with of the governors of Maryland and Virginia, Lord Fairfax, and a number of prominent gentlemen in Prince William County. He secured from them a testimonial of their confidence in his integrity and ability with a subscription to a fund to enable him to go to Great Britain to examine canals and locks.⁶⁵ On May 5, George Washington wrote a letter of introduction to Jonathan Boucher of Annapolis. (Surely, this letter was sealed.) "Mr. Ballendine has a natural genius to things of this sort. His Principles have been loose; whether from a natural depravity, or distressed circumstances, I shall not undertake to determine; how far therefore a man of this cast is entitled to encouragement every one must judge for them self, for my part I think if he applies the money subscribed, to the end proposed, the public will derive great advantages for it."⁶⁶

On the May 10, George Washington wrote to Thomas Johnson that Mr. Ballendine has been here two or three days but Mr. Mason has not yet come I fear our Governor is still under the impression that a concurrence by our assembly in the scheme with yours of clearing the Potomac may weaken the proprietary claim of jurisdiction over that river and consequently he is not at liberty to assent to such a bill. In August Ballendine mapped both the Potomac and the James Rivers. John used this amazing map to convince investors that the distance over the continental divide was less than eleven miles. When this map is superimposed on a modern satellite image, the accuracy is remarkable.⁶⁷

John Ballendine arrived in England at a time shortly after Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to the Lord Commissioners of Trade in which he stated:

The country is well watered by several navigable rivers communicating with each other and by which and a short land carriage of only forty miles the produce of the land of the Ohio can even now be sent cheaper to the seaport town of Alexandria on the River Potomac than any kind of merchandise is at present sent from Northampton to London.⁶⁸

By 1773, Ballendine published a set of proposals. In the document, he placed this caveat, "The sums of money subscribed were to be solely applied to, and disposed of, for removing the obstructions in and rendering more open and extensively navigable, than at present the Potomac and James Rivers."⁶⁹ It seems unusual that Ballendine would restrict the scope of his project in this manner. In a printed advertisement on February 25, 1773, Ballendine clearly spoke of clearing the river for navigation but at the same time called for barges to be, at first, of 60 feet keel, 15 feet width, and 3 feet depth, so as to draw 2 feet of water, but might, in process of time, be replaced by barges of 150 or 200 tons, differently constructed.⁷⁰ Was John Ballendine exaggerating or did he have another idea about the road west?

September 8, 1774, Ballendine advertised in the Maryland Gazette that he had just arrived from Britain with a number of engineers and artificers (skilled workers and inventors) in order to remove the obstructions to the navigation of the Potomac River at and above the Lower Falls. Ballendine called for a meeting of his principle subscribers and others interested to be held at Georgetown on September 26. The meeting was

held October 10 in Georgetown and was attended by George Washington, Thomas Johnson, Jr., Charles Carroll, and David Ross. An announcement in the Maryland Gazette on October 25 listed the appointed trustees as George Washington, George Mason, Thompson Mason, Bryan Fairfax, Daniel McCarty, John Carlyle, John Dalton, William Ramsay, Robert Adam, William Ellzey, John Hough, Jos. Janney, Isaac Lane, Robert Rutherford, Abram Hite, and Joseph Neville all from Virginia. The trustees from Maryland were Thomas Johnson, Jr., Launcelot Jacques, Daniel Carroll, David Ross, Robert Peter, John Murdock, Thomas Richards, Thomas Johns, William Deadins, Adam Stewart, Richard Thompson, John Hanson, Charles Beatty, John Cary, Jacob Young, James Marshall, Dan & Sam Hughes, Thomas Cresap, Jonathan Hagar, and John Stall. The article also announced a meeting to be held on November 12 to choose a smaller number of trustees from this group. "This meeting is judged to be important as the subscriber John Ballendine is now at work on the locks at the Little Falls on the Maryland side of the river with the engineers and skilled workers he brought from England."⁷¹

From the Virginia Gazette dated January 14, 1775:

At two different meetings one Dec. 1 and another on Dec. 18 the trustees agreed to hire 50 slaves. Any person inclining to hire the whole or any part of them may see the proceedings of the said Trustees subscribed with their respective hands in my custody.⁷²

In the Virginia Gazette dated October 28, 1775, Ballendine wrote from the falls of the James River on October 25, 1775:

At the earnest solicitation of many gentlemen on Potomac and influenced by my own interest on that river I have been endeavoring to open its navigation for tide water upwards, and have been at considerable expense in preparation to forward that useful work, but the necessity of a Maryland Act of Assembly co-operating with one passed in Virginia and which I have not been able to obtain has obliged me to decline it for the present. This disappointment would be the more affecting if it did not afford me an opportunity of employing my time and attention in opening and extending the navigation of the James River, which though a work less interesting to me is of equal utility to the public. But to make my interest in

some measure correspond with the public I have paid 360 sterling to Mr. Patrick Courts for the lands situated on the river where the water must be taken out into the canal and which I have began and done some part of the canal with other improvements very expensive.⁷³

History has not been kind to John Ballendine; he has been portrayed as a failure and a man without morals. I hope I have changed your mind about this.

Let us look at what John Ballendine built with his own money and without the support of any of the colonels. The distance from Seneca Falls to the tidewater is 24 miles at it shortest distance. When the Potomac Company started opening the Potomac for navigation in 1828 they moved the dams that John used to provide water for his mills at Seneca by-pass and built the canal locks at Little Falls. Let's look at what he did for the Potomac with what he had to work with. Before John Ballendine started his work on the river the road trip from Seneca Falls to the tidewater was 23 miles on the Virginia side of the river. When he finished that work and went to England the road trip was cut to 2 or 3 miles.

Now, think about the imaginary trip I proposed earlier, where the boatmen stopped at Widow Brewster's to wait for a buyer to arrive and make an offer for their hard work. This time, they use wagons to make the three-mile road trip to the meadows just below the Great Falls. Once there, they transfer their cargo to a raft for the short journey across the river to the diversion dam built by John Ballendine, then down the canal that fed the water wheel of Ballendine's mill at Lock Inlet: Just three miles to go; soon the mill will be in sight. As we poll up to the mill and prepare to pay the toll we realize the end of our journey is near. There we will see the tidewater Potomac, which is the connection to the rest of the world. Not only the tidewater can be seen, but at least two sailing ships moored at the mill docks and least five other sailing ships ready and waiting to bargain for our cargo. What a great trip! The trappers, farmers and manufactures of the western lands have the opportunity to bargain for their hard work in a complete market place. If it were not for John Ballendine's hard work, this opportunity would not have been available to the common man for another twenty years.

It was more than a canal; it was a giant leap forward for the Potomac River as a road west. The Potomac River provided the most efficient way to get over the Blue Ridge Mountains and arrive at the coalmines of the Cumberland area. As we find later in history when the canal and railroad engage in a two and one half year legal battle for the passage through the Blue Ridge. The elevation required crossing the Blue Ridge Mountains for the canal and the railroad between Point of Rocks and Harpers Ferry took four locks of eight feet each. That amounts to 32 feet while the northern route the railroad surveyed through Thurmont and Hagerstown was 16,500 feet.

The moneyed gentry of the Potomac and James Rivers could have sent anyone to England; there was a reason they sent John Ballendine.

When John gave up on the hope that Maryland's politicians would care about the people outside of Baltimore, including those that had control of the Potomac, he went to Richmond and built a canal for Virginia on the James River. It must have been a canal because the State of Virginia passed a bill in 1784 to repay him 20,000 Pounds for building their canal.⁷⁴

In Church's article he stated that, "Ballendine fared badly. The Buckingham mine and furnace which he held with Reveley could not produce the iron contracted for, and the State had to supplement it with pig iron furnished from other contractors."⁷⁵ The canal was not finished so Jefferson wanted to contract a French firm to do a better job but the French government refused to allow the artisans leave the country.⁷⁶

Kamoie writes that in Jefferson's *1787 Notes on the State of Virginia* David Ross produced and astounding 1,600 tons of iron, John Ballendine produced 1,000 tons of iron and three other furnaces produced and average of 600 tons of iron. Tayloe's production was under the average annual range of 500 tons.⁷⁷

Why would Jefferson want to replace the second highest iron producer in Virginia?

At this writing I do not know what happened to Thomas after his father's death. Thomas said his father was "seized with indisposition" which lasted until his death on October 14, 1781.⁷⁸ We do not know where any of the Ballendine family is buried or much about Thomas Ballendine's life, other than he was one of the first honor students at William and Mary and joined Washington's army. I hope this article will inspire others

to keep this family in mind as we continue to search for a greater understanding of our history.

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