

RICHARD BLAND, REVOLUTIONARY PHILOSOPHER

Richard Bland College News

Press Release by Marjorie Solenberger (July 1994)

On the 200th Anniversary of Richard Bland's Death

and

The Unveiling of a Portrait of Richard Bland

The founder of the Bland family in America was the grandfather of the Revolutionary patriot, Richard Bland. Theodorick Bland, the first of the line, came to Virginia from England in 1654. A man of wealth and position, he owned what later came to be the Byrd estate at Westover in Charles City County. Theodorick became Speaker of the House of Burgesses and later a member of the Governor's Council. Being a member of the Council marked him as one of the leading men in the colony, no mean accomplishment for a man who died in 1571 after living only seventeen years in Virginia.

One of the three surviving sons of Theodorick Bland was Richard Bland I, born at Berkeley, Charles City County in 1665; he died at Jordan's Point, Prince George County in 1720. Richard Bland I was a Justice of the Peace of Charles City County and later of Prince George County, a member of the House of Burgesses, a vestryman in the Episcopal Church and member of the Board of Visitors at The College of William and Mary. He made the decision to sell the Bland lands in Charles City County to the Byrds and to purchase a new estate at Jordan's Point, Prince George County. It was to Richard Bland I and his wife, Elizabeth Randolph of Turkey Island, that Richard Bland II, the Revolutionary patriot, was born on May 6, 1710. Richard Bland I and his wife Elizabeth died in 1720 leaving their son, Richard, aged nine, in the care of his uncles, William and Richard Randolph.

Richard Bland II, after whom Richard Bland College is named, was educated by tutors as was the custom of the time among the wealthy planters of Virginia. He attended the College of William and Mary where he received the traditional classical education of an eighteenth century Virginia gentleman, in Greek, Latin, Ancient History, mathematics, and science.

Richard Bland II settled down to the life of a wealthy slaveholder and as planter on his lands at Jordan's Point, Prince George County upon reaching legal age in the 1730's. He married three times and was the father of twelve children, all by his first wife, Anne Poythross.

Richard Bland would have been long forgotten if the life of a planter had been his only interest. He looked to greater challenges and began a career as a public servant. Following the list of offices he held shows that Richard Bland well knew the ways to leadership among his fellow planters. Early in his life he became a Justice of the Peace and a vestryman of the state church of Virginia, the Episcopal. He entered the militia in 1739, eventually rising to the rank of Colonel and also became Lieutenant of the County of Prince George. His post of Lieutenant does not denote the rank of Lieutenant in the militia. It is a post analogous to the office of Lord Lieutenant in England. Richard Bland was in charge of militia inspection, equipment, pay, training, enlistment and promotion for Prince George County. This was a post of special importance during the colonial war with France from 1754 to 1763, the French and Indian War.

In the 1740's, as a middle aged man, he began to study law on his own and was admitted to the Virginia bar in 1746. He was described as a practical farmer, careless of dress, spare of build and a somewhat bookish scholar. He became known throughout Virginia as an expert on Virginia and British political and legal history and law as well as a noted collector of old Virginia documents.

Richard Bland of Jordan's Point served as a member of the House of Burgesses from Prince George from 1742 to 1775. By the time the arguments began with Great Britain leading to the Revolution, he was a senior member of the House. He was either chairman or a senior member of the key committees which controlled the important business of the Virginia legislature, Privileges and elections, Propositions and Grievances, Public Claims and Chairman of the Committee of the Whole House. He served on numerous ad hoc committees set up to deal with such delicate and controversial issues as the mismanagement of the Virginia monetary system by Treasurer John Robinson, the Stamp Act Crisis and the Two Penny Act Crisis.

From the 1750's to the 1770's Richard Bland as involved in so many controversies involving citizen's rights that he was acknowledged as one of the leading revolutionary patriots. During the argument in the 1750's with Governor Robert Dinwiddie over the Pistole Fee, Bland headed a legislative committee to study whether the governor had a right to levy a fee for the granting of land deeds. Resolves were drawn up and sent to the Board of Trade in London. So well were the arguments presented to the board by Richard Bland's committee that important restrictions were placed on the governor's powers to levy fees for the performance of legal work.

Richard Bland was best known throughout Colonial America for his pamphlets which mark him as a political philosopher in addition to a practicing politician. During the Pistole Fee controversy he wrote his first pamphlet, A Modest and True State of the Case.

During the French and Indian War of 1754 to 1763 Richard Bland became a leading worker in the legislature in support of Virginia troops in the field. He drafted and saw to the passage of laws to provide for the improvement of the defense of the colony and for the reorganization of the militia. He acted as Commissioner for the Indian tribes in the western part of the colony. These efforts being made to keep these Indian nations friendly with England during the conflict with France was a matter of the greatest importance.

During the French and Indian war, between 1758 and 1762, Richard Bland headed a committee to represent to the British government the position of the colonial government of Virginia in a controversy with the ministers of the state church of Virginia over salaries. This affair known as the Two Penny Act or the Parson's Cause led Bland to again take up his pen. He published "A Letter to the Clergy of Virginia" and in 1764 a pamphlet, The Colonel Dismounted. He argued against the concept of a state church dominating the civil affairs of the colony, again championing the cause of civil rights. Patrick Henry is best remembered for his case against one of the parsons in a trial at Hanover Court House in 1762. In fact, this trial began Patrick Henry's political career. Henry was a fine orator and a showman; Bland was neither. History has been attracted by the more charismatic man, Henry, and has often ignored the less spectacular but far more productive services of Richard Bland during this affair.

During the Stamp Act crises of 1765 with Great Britain the issues over legal and civil rights were developing that would lead to the opening of the Revolution ten years later. In 1766 Bland presented his views on the subject in a pamphlet entitled On Inquiry Into the Rights of the British Colonies. During the protest against the Townshend Act taxes in 1767 Richard Bland again was a leader of the older and more moderate faction of senior members in the House of Burgesses who opposed British polity. He was one of the organizers of “The Association For the Non-Importation of British Goods” in 1769 and 1770. He joined others that sought to reform British policy not by mere verbal and written petitions of protest but also by applying economic pressure on the English economy through agreements to stop buying products from Great Britain.

Richard Bland was an organizer and active participant in the Virginia Committee of Correspondence from 1773 to 1775, laboring on the all important task of keeping in touch with patriot leaders in other colonies, sharing information and co-coordinating policies of opposition to British law and administration that tended to diminish the rights and legal rights of the colonists.

When the First Continental Congress met in Carpenters Hall, Philadelphia, Penn. with representatives from twelve colonies; Richard Bland sat among the Virginia delegation. He helped to frame and voted for the “Declaration and Resolves” of October 14, 1774 that were sent to King George III to protest violations of American civil liberties by the British government. Bland sat at the Virginia Convention at St. John’s Church in Richmond, listening to the “give me liberty or give me death speech of Patrick Henry;” doubtlessly leaving the church feeling that Henry’s tone and demands were too radical for the times.

In 1775 Richard Bland was elected to the Second Continental Congress and sat in that body at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War as Congress, out of necessity, began to assume the first powers of a government of the United States. He left Congress in the fall of 1775, pleading ill health, but public duty called again. His last services to Virginia was as a member of the Committee of Public Safety from 1775-1776; this being Virginia’s first state government. During this time Richard Bland aided in the writing of the first state constitution of Virginia.

We have noted that Richard Bland was remembered by his contemporaries as a political philosopher. Today his fame rests more on what he wrote than on his thirty years of legislative leadership. In his thinking Richard Bland was an English Whig, more conservative than Patrick Henry, Sam Adams or Thomas Jefferson, he was nevertheless far too liberal to side with the King during the Revolution. Bland was influenced by such seventeenth century English Whigs as John Locke, Sir Edward Coke, John Pym, John Eliot and he must have developed some admiration for Oliver Cromwell. From these British political leaders of an earlier generation Richard Bland developed his beliefs in the principles of good government. Good government was a government guaranteeing basic civil rights and liberties, allowing people to vote and participate in the decision making processes, while at the same time limiting the sovereignty of the state in order to preserve liberty and democracy.

Richard Bland believed that God endowed man with basic civil rights that no government can abolish. A citizen owes allegiance to any government as long as it basically respects the civil rights and liberties of the citizens. However when a government repeatedly and continually violates your natural rights then the situation can

only be justly remedied by revolution. Revolution in this case is leg, not reason. Bland, in his actions as a leader of the Burgesses and as a pamphleteer had been pointing out for over ten years repeated examples of the violation of natural rights of British Americans by the home government in London. He criticized numerous Royal governors of Virginia for likewise ruling the colony in such a manner as to deny the basic natural rights of Virginians.

Richard Bland College, the Southside Virginia branch of the College of William and Mary, after months of public appeal has a likeness of Richard Bland, the Revolutionary War leader. Ironically, a guide provided by a member of the Bland family residing in Catonsville, Maryland, reveals the college's namesake is a seated figure in a well known portrait at Red Hill Shrine in Virginia.

John Randolph Bland learned of the college's search through clippings forwarded to him in Maryland by an old friend, Col. Mark Alexander Herbert Smith of Grassland Farm in Linden, Virginia. Immediately Bland wrote Dr. Thomas A Graves Jr., president of William and Mary, who sent along the letter to Dr. Cornelis Laban, acting president of RBC. It was the latter's concern about locating a likeness prior to the Nation's bicentennial observances that rekindled efforts begun after the college's establishment in 1961. Included in the information sent from Maryland was a guide to the figures in a large, 3 by 2 foot engraving, done by Alfred Jones in 1852 for members of the Philadelphia Art Society. The guide had come to the family through the owner's mother, the former Mary Paul of Philadelphia, and hangs in the hall of his home, Bellevue on Rolling Road in Catonsville, Maryland. The engraving is a copy of a famous painting, "Patrick Henry Before the House of Burgesses May 30, 1765: by Peter Frederick Rothermel, who lived from 1817-1895.

College officials received the information with astonishment as their earlier appeals to well known repositories until this time had come to naught. Its arrival began another intensive letter writing campaign to learn the whereabouts of the original picture. Mrs. E.K. Solenberger, coordinator of communications at RBC, directed letters to Philadelphia, Williamsburg, Baltimore and finally the Patrick Henry Red Hill Shrine near Brookneal in Charlotte County, Virginia.

One of the most astonished, when learning of the guide, was Edward A. Wyatt IV, Petersburg historian, whose own home contains one of the historical engravings of the same Patrick Henry address.

"Until I saw a copy of the guide, I never knew that the seated figure occupying the most prominent place in the engraving was that of Richard Bland," he said, "to think it has been in my family all these years."

Members of Richard Bland College's spring graduating class are so convinced that at last the college has visual likeness they voted to use their class gift contribution to having a portrait made from the Rothermel painting.

An appeal for additional information from Richard K. Newman, chairman of the W & M department of fine arts, determined the painting had been exhibited in "They Gave Us Our Freedom," a collection shown at the college in 1951. He described Rothermel as a history painter who served as director of the Pennsylvania Academy from 1847-1855 and thought the painting, done about 1850 to be owned by the academy. Newman urged additional research to determine the validity of the likeness as the painting had been done about 85 years after the event it portrays.

Information from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts located the portrait, a life size painting now insured for \$50,000, to be on permanent display at Patrick Henry's last home and burial place. It has been returned by the Academy to the Hamilton Estate for donation to the Red Hill Shrine. Mabel Oliver Bellwood, curator of the Patrick Henry Shrine, received the information from the guide with mingled pleasure and concern as over the years with no key she thought the seated figure was that of Richard Henry Lee.

The guide dates the scene as of 1765 as the time Richard Bland was 55, having been born May 6, 1710, at Jordan's in Hopewell. In the painting he is shown seated in the House of Burgesses just after the news of the enactment of the Stamp Act reached Virginia and Patrick Henry, a young man of 29 "offered Resolutions opposing the right of the Crown to override the self government of Virginia, with a rush or eloquence that startled and swept the House."

The Key published in conjunction with the picture indicates the following members and other present: Richard Bland, seated prominently in left foreground; Edmund Pendleton, arising with a gesture of protest; Peyton Randolph, seated to left of Richard Bland; George Wythe, behind Pendleton on extreme left; John Robinson, speaker of the House; a Mr. Johnson, who seconded his Resolution; a British officer drawing sword, clerk of the House; one or more Tories, expressions indicating the varying degrees of sympathy or opposition with which the speech was received."

The information from Bland reveals that Thomas Jefferson, then a young man and later to become a member of the House, in company with George Washington, wrote that he stood at the door of the lobby of the House of Burgesses during this debate and "heard the splendid display of Mr. Henry's talents as a popular orator. "He appeared to me to speak as Homer wrote."

Richard Bland College now has prints made of the engraving that hung in the Bland home in Maryland as well as a color copy of the painting provided by Red Shrine.

Donor Bland, who traces his family back to the early 1300s, is the grandson of the founder of the United States Fidelity and Guaranty Company, one of the largest insurance companies in the nation. His interest in his illustrious forefather is being furthered by his nephew, John R. Bland III, whose recent visit to Virginia included the presentation of additional information on the family to the colleges.

The search for the visual reproduction of Richard Bland has extended for many years. The Frick Art Reference Library in New York researched its collection of 500,000 personalities from the beginning of the Christian era to 1860 to report "no visual reproduction" of Bland.

Only two years ago the Curator of the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, Robert G. Stewart, searched for such a portrait and came to a negative conclusion. His decision was based on a letter written by Mrs. William Taylor (Sallie Bland) of Prince George on January 5, 1886, to Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet of New York, and now in the files of the New York Public library.

In answer to his request for a portrait of Richard Bland, Mrs. Taylor wrote that her father, the late Dr. Theodore Bland, at the request of friends, had presented a "very accurate portrait of his grandfather to the Historical Society of Virginia" headquartered in Richmond.

“Before the surrender of that city during the War all the portraits belonging to the Historical Society were given to private citizens for safe-keeping. Many of these portraits have never been returned, among them Richard Bland’s.”

“Different members of our family have made effort to turn up the portrait; but have as yet been unsuccessful,’ she concluded.

Historians note the fire set by General Robert E. Lee’s troops to destroy the ammunition depots while evacuating Richmond spread to the residential areas and it is “reasonable to assume the portrait was destroyed.”

The 4 x 5 foot portrait, done by Susan Brown of the Richard Bland College art department, was unveiled at a special Convocation on the 200th anniversary of the subject’s death. Done in earth tones of rust, olive green and antique gold, the work reproduces the Virginia patriot and scholar as he appeared in the original painting at the Patrick Henry Memorial at Red Hill, located near Brookneal, Virginia (paragraph added 1996)