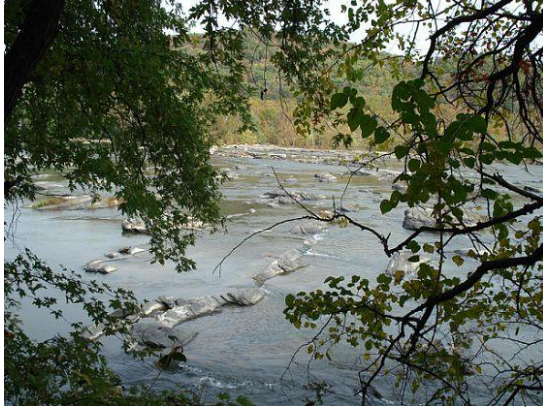


## The Significance of the Colonial Period in Jefferson County

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1748 was an important year in the area that today is Jefferson County, West Virginia. That was the year

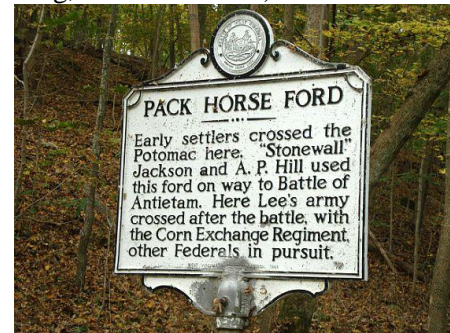


a young kid named George Washington, age 16, began surveying for Lord Fairfax. Robert Harper was already at Harpers Ferry, and Peter Burr (great grandson of one of the earliest Puritans in America) arrived to begin looking for a place to build his house. In the next fifty or so years, the area changed from Frederick County, to Berkeley County, to Jefferson County as settlers representing varied cultures came to the fertile land between the beautiful Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers.

Since that time, influences in the area like the railroad, the C&O Canal, and the Civil War have left indelible footprints that well define history for the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But earlier history is disjointed relating to the important colonial, revolutionary, and federalists' periods in this amazing place. The last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was and remains intrinsically important yet greatly fragmented. These were the years when our nation began to take shape and key people in that shaping walked on our soil. We, as local citizens, need greater understanding of that time period. Reliving History, Inc. has been organized to support an increased focus on the time frame of about 1750-1800.

Today, the oldest wood-frame house in the state of West Virginia is the Peter Burr House. The less well-known builder of that historic old house arrived in the Virginia frontier west of the Blue Ridge Mountains in 1748 barely twenty years after the first white settler supposedly built the first permanent home in the state. Peter Burr represented the middling class (hard working, salt of the earth) settler entering the area from the northeast in contrast with wealthier plantation owners coming up from Virginia's tidewater area. As Native Americans in earlier generations and as many settlers before and after him, Burr crossed the Potomac River at Pack Horse Ford.

In 1750 and 1751 George Washington and his four brothers (Lawrence, John Augustine, Samuel, and Charles) began acquiring land grants from Lord Fairfax. Robert Harper acquired the 125 acres that later became Harpers Ferry. In June and July 1751, Peter Burr and his son (also named Peter) purchased their two land grants (886 acres) from Lord Fairfax.



The center-point years in the 18<sup>th</sup> century marked a significant time of impending change for the area we know today as Jefferson County. From about 1750 our history became significantly rich as Washington brothers and other settlers purchased thousands of acres at about the same time the French and Indian War was about to bloom. George inherited Mt Vernon after the untimely death of his half-brother Lawrence. Then after the great pumpkin flood on the Potomac in October 1753, he found himself preparing for a task that would in fact get him caught up in wartime efforts that would change his life. Meanwhile, his three younger brothers continued with maturing and acquiring land in this area. Our culture is reflected by different settlers from various areas who came to the area for different reasons. Like other yeoman farm families and people of diverse backgrounds and trades and among wealthier plantation owners, the two Peter Burrs began working their land and setting up housekeeping amidst history in the making.



By 1751, the two Peter Burrs (father and son) built the house that somehow has managed to survive to become today's oldest wood-frame house in the state of West Virginia. The elder Burr was a master builder who descended from a line of master builders. The original house rivaled those of the wealthiest plantation owners in the colony at that time with two stories each with two rooms. In Dec 1754, the elder Peter Burr sold the larger land grant (that was then near today's Beallair Estates and included all of the upper section of the current golf course above today's railroad tracks). He returned to his

wife, Rebecca, who was too ill in Fairfield, CT to make the trip. The son, who is the Burr we locally refer to as Peter Burr, stayed and began raising his family.

Burr, a yeoman farmer, cleared his land and provided for his family. Of his 13 children, all born in the old house that exists today, the first 6 were daughters. It took him 16 years before his first son (also named Peter) was born. In contrast with the large plantation owners, Burr worked his own farm. His estate inventory indicates he did not own slaves but instead hired free blacks and indentured servants.

By about the 1770s (approximately the Revolutionary War period) the house was enlarged to include a new section to the west with upstairs rooms that connected the two sections and extended over the open center section that is often known as "dog trot" style construction with a breezeway between the two sections. The breezeway was filled in by the early 1800s after Burr died on January 20, 1795 and the house passed down to his oldest son who sold it soon thereafter and migrated to the Ohio Territory.

The existing house (as seen today) has remained structurally unchanged for about 200 years. How it managed to survive wars, weather, fires, termites, scores of children, and even today's industrialization of the area amazes descendants of Peter Burr's thirteen children, all of whom were born and raised there. Descendants today describe the eerie feeling as neck hairs stand on end as one looks out the east window and imagines 13 sets of little feet running and playing carefree with never a thought that more than 200 years later their descendants would be looking out their window and imagining their world.

The house itself is a historical, architectural, and archaeological treasure, but also it occupies a place of relevance as rich history occurred all around this property as the typical family of colonial settlers pursued farm life amid the diverse people of their time.

Daily, they saw history in the making. They saw the same history that merits many chapters in today's history books. But even more, they felt the feelings and wondered about their future as they saw history from the other side, before and during the time it was in process.

Warm Springs Road was a main dirt road by 1750. It cut through Peter Burr's property. George Washington passed through Peter Burr's land on his way to Berkeley Springs, and he mentions Burr by name in at least one of his land surveys. Burr is also on record as helping Thomas Rutherford survey at least one property. It is possible that some of Gen Braddock's troops may have used Warm Springs Road in 1755 and likely that riflemen passed by Burr's house in 1775 on their way to the rally point where the "Beeline March" began near today's Morgan's Grove Park.



*Warm Springs Road as it looks today.*

Burr's name appears on the Berkeley County voting rolls and on a receipt showing that he provided supplies to the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Among the various crops, he raised tobacco and would have gone to the old tobacco warehouse that still stands today.

Peter Burr and members of his family had a ring-side view of history in the making. They may have been among the 1000



*The Old Tobacco Warehouse in Shepherdstown*

witnesses in 1787 of James Rumsey's steamboat experiment 20 years before Robert Fulton's. They may have heard about Thomas Jefferson visiting the area, standing on his rock, and declaring the view to be worth a voyage across the sea. They were probably aware of nearby homes that were built in the area that

know today as Harewood, Happy Retreat, and Beallair. They probably heard via local grapevines when James Madison married Dolly at Harewood. (Their cousin Aaron Burr had in fact introduced his dear friend, the lovely Dolley, to his Princeton classmate, James.) As they heard the news of what was going on with the Continental Congress, they may have had political opinions as we do today. That which we know as well-documented history, they knew only as the unknown future.

They knew some of the participants from a time before our nation's founders were leaders. We can only wonder what untold stories they knew about these men or how they felt when that 16-year-old kid they once knew became the first President of the United States. They may have known James Rumsey as others did as Crazy Rumsey who paced back and forth in thought at his favorite spot on the west side above the Potomac. They entertained Rev. Phillip Vickers Fithian (a former classmate of their cousin Aaron) who spent a February night in their home before he was killed in the Revolutionary War, at Fort Washington that same year. As a typical family in the center of what today is Jefferson County, the people who lived in the oldest wood-frame house in West Virginia represent the eyes of those who saw history in the making.

While the area reflects a great deal of Washington family culture, a blend of various cultures are a more accurate picture of the real colonial period in the frontiers west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Peter Burr built his house before any of the Washington family homes (that exist today in the area) were built. As a yeoman farmer, he began clearing his land and building his home shortly before George Washington delivered the message that began the French and Indian War. Burr and his family continued to live in that same house through the Revolutionary War and into the early federalist period. But this story does not begin or end with Peter Burr. He and his story mark an important mid point in family history that also reflects the history of American culture.



If the above is not enough to position the Peter Burr House as historically significant, then add still one other golden thread that is woven brilliantly into the fabric. The Peter Burr House was built by hand by a father and son who were great grandson and great great grandson respectively of Jehue Burr, who with 700+ other Puritans (men, women, and children with live stock and with all their personal belongings



*A view of Peter Burr's house today as seen from Warm Springs Road. While the industrial park and water tower did not exist in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the fields and the soil did exist. The entrance to Burr's house would have been at the right of the picture near where the B&O railroad is today. Fences and other elements of farm life were likely visible, but this is generally what George Washington and others in that day may have seen as they passed by on this main road.*

distributed among the eleven ships) arrived 120 years earlier with John Winthrop in that famous fleet on June 12, 1630. They departed Yarmouth, Isle of Wight in England on April 8, 1630 and landed at Salem, Massachusetts after nine weeks at sea. These Puritans became the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They were deeply religious people coming to a new land for religious freedom. They came with whole families in tuck, and unlike most other early immigrants, nearly all survived the difficult voyage. The passengers took up residence in Salem, Boston, and the nearby area.

Jehue Burr became an overseer of roads and bridges in Roxbury, an area a little south in what today is Boston. As a master builder he (as are several of his descendants) is on record as having built their churches as well as other structures. Within the next ten years, Jehue Burr took his family and migrated inland twice. With many early credits to his name, Jehue Burr is well documented as having helped: negotiate land transactions with Native Americans, purchase property, and found two villages that today are known as Springfield, MA and Fairfield, CT. His earliest descendants occupied numerous places of significance in early American history including a chief justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court, A spy for George Washington for the Culper Spy Ring during the American Revolution, a founder of Princeton University and pillar during the Great Awakening, and a former Vice President of the United States. His direct line (via his son Jehu, grandson Daniel, and great grandson Peter) is well documented in many New England archives.

That same great grandson, Peter Burr, a builder like the generations before him was the builder of the house in today's West Virginia that still stands as a testimony to early craftsmanship and hard work. But that likewise is not the end of the story.

As many of the early settlers came to the Shenandoah Valley for religious reasons. Likewise, Peter Burr, as his ancestors before him was significant as an early participant in the founding of two churches that continue to operate in our area today: the Elk Branch and the Charles Town Presbyterian Churches. Charles Washington conveyed a deed for land to the Charles Town Presbyterian Church on which Peter Burr is named as an elder. About twenty-five years earlier, his name also appeared as an elder on the deed for the land where the original Elk Branch Church was built. Peter Burr was a highly religious man, who (according to family lore) was found dead in January 1795 at his prayer table with his Bible open on the table in front of him.

As the elder Peter Burr and son were planning their migration to the frontier that today is Jefferson County, WV, their brother and uncle (respectively), Rev. Aaron Burr, was fully involved in the activity of founding a small college that would become very important. Rev. Burr had earlier become a close associate (and future son-in-law) of Rev. Jonathan Edwards, a primary leader in the Great Awakening. The Reverends Burr, Edwards, and Jonathan Dickinson, with a couple of others helped found New Jersey College, now known as Princeton University. That college was founded to train young Presbyterian ministers. Rev. Burr served as president of the college beginning the same year the two Peter Burrs migrated to VA. He served as president of Princeton from its second year until his death, 1748-1757. He was the first to be buried in the President's Lot at Princeton.

It is unknown how much affect Rev. Aaron Burr may have had on the decision of his brother (the elder Peter Burr) and nephew in their move to the new frontier west of the Blue Ridge Mountains and across



*Elk Branch Presbyterian Church,  
founded 1769*



*Charles Town Presbyterian Church,  
founded 1786*

the Potomac River. However, the younger Peter Burr reflected similar ideology as his name appears in the earliest days of recorded history of two Presbyterian Churches in our area. Religious freedom and revival was a key thread that ran through the fabric of Peter Burr's family. A similar thread seems well embedded in the eclectic cultures of our area and also within our country.

### Timeline of Events

The following is a skeletal timeline of events that help reflect the order of historic events.

1747	Lord Fairfax comes to the colonies to inspect his land and sets up his office at "Greenway Court" in Winchester, VA
1747	Robert Harper (an architect and millwright from Philadelphia) crosses the Potomac at "The Hole," now known as Harpers Ferry
1748	George Washington (age 16) begins surveying for Lord Fairfax
1748	Peter Burr (a master builder from Fairfield, CT) and his son, Peter, cross the Potomac at Pack Horse Ford and arrive in the area
1750	George Washington and brothers begin purchasing land patents from Lord Fairfax
1751	Peter Burr purchases two land grants (totaling 886 acres) from Lord Fairfax
1751	Robert Harper purchases 125 acres from Lord Fairfax
1753	The Great Pumpkin Flood occurs on the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers in October
1754-1763	The French and Indian War
1756-1763	Peter Burr's first four children are born
1759-1760	Smallpox epidemic occurs
1761	Robert Harper establishes a ferry across the Potomac in the town soon thereafter named "Shenandoah Falls"
1765-1767	Two more Burr children are born including his first son born 16 years after he begins clearing the land
1768	Expansion period (2 Indian treaties open frontier for growth)
1772	A seventh child is born to Peter Burr and his first wife
1773	Peter Burr's first wife (Mary Stewart Burr) dies
1774-1787	Continental Congress and early founding of our nation
1774-1783	The Revolutionary War begins
1775	With 7 young children to raise, Peter Burr marries Jane Calhoun of Lancaster Co, PA
1776-1785	Peter Burr adds 6 more children to his household by his second wife
1781	Lord Fairfax dies at Greenway Court
1783	Thomas Jefferson visited Harpers Ferry and calls the site "perhaps one of the most stupendous scenes in nature."
1787	James Rumsey successfully demos the 1st steamboat locally years before Robert Fulton gets the credit
1789	George Washington is elected President of the United States
1791	First Cousin Aaron Burr wins a US Senate seat for the state of New York
1794	Senator Aaron Burr of NY introduces James Madison to Dolley Payne Todd and the two are married at Harewood the same year
1794	Washington proposes Harpers Ferry for a new United States armory and arsenal
1795	Peter Burr dies
1799	George Washington dies
1799	Aaron Burr founds the Bank of the Manhattan Company, which later evolves into the Chase Manhattan Bank and later J P Morgan Chase
1800	Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson tie for President of the US. The tie is broken in the House of Representatives after 36 ballots. Events lead to changes in the Constitution.