

A PRINCE GEORGE'S HERO RECALLED

By Shirley V. Baltz

Probably everyone is familiar with the town of Covington, Kentucky. Certainly any number of persons are aware of Covington Louisiana, Georgia, Virginia, Ohio and Tennessee, Fort Covington in New York or Covington counties in Alabama and Mississippi. A few may have read recent accounts about re-development in the Port Covington section of Baltimore. But how many realize that all the above localities are named after a fourth-generation Prince Georgean, Brigadier-General Leonard Covington, who was born near Aquasco on 30 October 1768?

His great-grandfather, Levin Covington, the son of Nehemiah and Rebecca (Denwood) Covington of Somerset County, was in Prince George's by 1711, for, in that year, he acquired a 705-acre tract enclosing portions of "Brooke Court Manor" and of "Joseph and Mary," lying along the Patuxent in the far southeast corner of the county. In 1715 he added fifty acres, patented as "Covington's Pond," to his land-holdings.

Levin was active in local government, serving several times as Justice of the Peace and as Overseer of the roads in Mattapony Hundred. Following removal of the Prince George's county seat from Charlestown to Upper Marlboro, he was involved in the construction of a court house at the new site.

Margery Hollyday, daughter of Thomas Hollyday, became the wife of Levin and when he died in late 1725, he devised 500 acres called "Hollyday's Choice," which Margery had inherited from her father, to their daughter, Elizabeth. He directed that "Covington's Vineyard" and "Covington's Comfort" in Somerset County, 450 acres which had descended to him by the will of his father, were to be sold by his widow. To his wife and son, Leonard, Levin left all of the tract "whereon I now dwell" to be divided equally between them, and upon Margery's death, the whole was to become Leonard's.

Leonard sustained the Hollyday connection by marrying Priscilla, daughter of Col. Leonard Hollyday. Two children, Levin and Rebecca, were born to the couple before Leonard died in his 30th year on 19 May 1742. A tombstone identifying his grave is the only one remaining in the half-acre family cemetery exempted from later conveyances of the Covington plantation.

Termed "an amiable and well accomplished young gentlewoman," on 24 April 1756 daughter Rebecca married Benjamin Mackall, Jr., a delegate to the Maryland Legislature from Calvert County.

Leonard had died intestate, but his property came into the possession of his son Levin, who in 1769 applied for a re-survey of the estate. A new patent issued to him combined 545 acres of "Brooke Court Manor," 240 acres of "Joseph and Mary," the 50 acres of "Covington's Pond" and part of "Poplar Hill" into one entity named "Covington's Farm."

As conditions with England grew more unsettled, Levin was one of the men named on 21 September 1775 to enroll a local company of minute men. The next year he was commissioned a captain. When Oaths of Fidelity were taken in 1778 he joined with his neighbors in renouncing allegiance to the British king and in pledging support to the new nation.

Circa 1781, before reaching the age of forty, Levin Covington died, leaving his widow, the former Susannah Magruder, to raise their two sons, Leonard and Alexander. The boys grew to adulthood in rural Prince George's County. Leonard "possessed an elegant English, mathematical, and slight latin education, and was designed by an affectionate mother....for the plain but honorable occupation of husbandry."

In October 1789 Leonard married Susannah Somerville, but, sadly, within a short time, she and their young daughter died. Perhaps it was the loss of his family which led him to become a participant in events far beyond the borders of Maryland.

Although England had ceded the Northwest Territory to the Americans under the peace treaty of 1783, its agents and the many Indian tribes of the area had never given up control. Settlers moving beyond the mountains into Ohio faced the constant threat of massacre, a threat from which the small forts established in the territory offered little protection.

If the United States was to gain sovereignty and insure the safety of new settlers, military steps had to be taken. Two separate armies, one in 1790 under command of General Josias Harmer and the second in 1791 under General Arthur St. Clair, made attempts to subdue the Indians and both were soundly defeated.

Affairs had taken a serious turn, leading to the demand that "a strong army....must be raised, and disciplined to fight the Indians in their own manner...."

Several likely candidates, each capable of recruiting, training and leading the new army, were considered by President Washington before he made his selection. On 13 April 1792 it was announced that "Anthony Wayne, Esq.....will.....succeed to command of the troops destined for the protection of the frontiers."

On 14 March 1792 Leonard Covington entered the military, having received a commission from Washington as a Coronet in the Light Dragoons. His destiny lay with Wayne. By June that year the General was in Pittsburgh beginning the build-up and training of the army which was called "the Legion of the United States." Possibly Covington arrived for duty before the army moved about 27 miles down the Ohio River in November and set up winter quarters at what was called Legionville. He was definitely at the latter place and there was promoted to Lieutenant, his rank dating from 25 October 1792.

In the spring the forces moved down the Ohio to the vicinity of Fort Washington (today Cincinnati). On the only high ground unaffected by serious flooding, they established a camp named Hobson's Choice. There they remained through the summer as Wayne continued his intense preparations.

In the middle of September Wayne received orders from the secretary of war to move against the Indians and on the 7th of October he and his men marched to the north, travelling 10 to 12 miles a day and using forts Hamilton, St. Clair and Jefferson as stepping stones. Six miles beyond the latter, Wayne established a garrison called Greenville and there the army went into winter quarters. The dragoons, however, chose to travel into Kentucky to spend the winter.

With the arrival of spring the campaign was renewed. On June 30th a battle was fought at Fort Recovery, the Indians attacking just as a convoy of supplies arrived. Under vicious fire, soldiers and dragoons making up the train were pinned outside and against the walls of the fort. Covington was one of the men and had his horse shot from under him. Nightfall afforded them an opportunity to enter the fort and, at the same time, allowed the Indians to remove their many dead from the field. The action continued sporadically the next day, but disconsolate over their heavy casualties, the Indians gave up the battle and retreated.

In August Wayne's men engaged the Indians along the Maumee River at Fallen Timbers, a battlefield strewn with broken, uprooted trees, the debris of an earlier tornado. The general reported in his dispatches that following the death of Captain Campbell, "Lieutenant Covington, upon whom the command of the Cavalry now devolved, cut down two savages

with his own hand in turning the enemy's left flank." In less than an hour the Americans swept their opponents from the field. The decisive victory at Fallen Timbers broke the will and spirit of the resisting Indians.

The next summer, in July 1795, chieftains from many tribes met with Wayne at Greenville where they agreed to a treaty by which they ceded their rights to all of Ohio, plus parts of Indiana and Illinois. The authority of the United States was finally established in the Northwest Territory.

The virtual end of hostilities on the western frontier brought a reduction in federal forces and the now "Captain" Covington was permitted to resign his commission on 12 September 1795. Sometime in that year he sat for James Peale, perhaps in Philadelphia, the artist's place of residence.

Returning to Prince George's County, on March 29th in 1796 he married his cousin, Rebecca Mackall of Calvert County, the daughter of Benjamin and Rebecca (Covington) Mackall. In December, just as his father and grandfather had been at an earlier time, he was elected to the vestry of St. Paul's Church at Baden. Unlike them, however, he asked to be excused. Inasmuch as the Vestry was "satisfied with his reason," the request was honored.

Once again his efforts were centered on his plantation. On the 1798 Direct Federal Tax assessment, he was shown as the owner of "Covington Farm," the occupant of a brick dwelling house, forty by twenty-four feet.

With the arrival of the new century and Thomas Jefferson's election to the presidency, Leonard began to take an interest in politics. He was appointed an election judge for the First District in 1800 and in September 1801 he was selected as a state senatorial elector. The voting tally shows him as "Capt. Covington"; like many others, he had carried his rank over into civilian life.

Although chosen in November 1802 to fill the vacancy in the Maryland Senate caused by the resignation of Walter Bowie, he declined to accept the seat. As one of the republican citizens who met in Upper Marlboro in the spring, 1803, he was named to a committee charged with communicating their choice of a Congressional candidate to the republicans in Anne Arundel County.

When conferees representing republicans in the Second Congressional District, comprised of Prince George's County, Anne Arundel County and Annapolis, caucused at Queen Anne Town on 6 September 1804, they resolved that Leonard Covington ought to be their candidate and requested "their republican

brethern throughout the district to unite in his support." Covington was, in their opinion, the person "most likely to prevail over any candidate that may be brought forward by our political opponents." Their confidence was justified for in October he carried the election. From March 1805 to March 1807 he served in the Ninth United States Congress.

Giving up national office, on 11 November 1807 Leonard was appointed a Maryland Senator in place of James H. McCulloch, resigned. Devoted to the cause of Republicanism, he was credited with being "one of the first electors who changed the political complexion of the senate of his native state, and thereby made the political principles which had recently triumphed over the nation, triumph likewise over the state of Maryland."

By May of 1808 his brother Alexander and family were on their way to re-settle in Mississippi Territory. Through the summer Leonard awaited news of how they fared, plus a report on what economic possibilities the region afforded. He was seriously considering making the same change.

National events turned his contemplated move to Mississippi into reality. Due to troubles with England, an increase in the federal army was authorized, and when the Regiment of Light Dragoons was reorganized, on 9 January 1809 Covington was tendered an appointment as Lieutenant Colonel. His duty station was the Cantonment in Washington, Mississippi, the seat of the territorial government. It was near Natchez, and, best of all, in the area where his brother had settled. Thus, in the fall of 1809, Leonard having resigned his place in the Maryland Senate, the Covingtons, traveling by way of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, made their way south. Not too long after their arrival they purchased property which they named "Propinquity," because it lay adjacent to the cantonment.

Having been promoted to full command of the Regiment of Light Dragoons, Leonard was placed in charge of the garrison at Fort Adams. Descending the Mississippi with a detachment of troops, on 10 December 1810 he entered and took possession of Baton Rouge, formerly part of the Province of West Florida. In March 1811 Colonel Covington was ordered to Fort Stoddert, situated on the Mobile River above the Bay, and in August 1812 he was placed in command of the important garrison at Pass Christian, Mississippi. By that time the United States had declared war on Great Britain.

Ordered to the northern theater of operations, Covington left his home in Mississippi on 13 May 1813. The Intelligencer of 3 July noted that "the gallant Col. Covington,who distinguished himself in early life at the head of the cavalry under gen. Wayne," had passed through Washington

a "day or two ago." Receiving instructions to join his regiment, he set out for Sackett's Harbor, New York, where he arrived on the 28th. On August 1st he was promoted by President Madison to the rank of Brigadier-General.

In the last quarter of 1813, military action of the War of 1812 was concentrated in northern New York state and adjacent areas of Canada. The American army staff, after much deliberation, adopted a plan for the reduction of Canada, with General Wilkinson's forces at Sackett's Harbor converging with those of General Hampton, their goal the capture of Montreal. They would use the St. Lawrence River as their route of advance.

The next few months were spent gathering men, supplies, materiel and enough boats to transport everything. By the time the expedition was ready, winter was approaching. Severe storms prevailed through most of October causing extensive loss of equipment of every kind, but, finally, at the end of the month the flotilla set out. For the first few days, as it passed several Canadian forts, there was little difficulty. By the time they landed on the Canadian side of the river, near a place called Chrysler's Field, however, an enemy company of troops was following them. On the 11th of November the Americans received orders to engage their pursuers before resuming their journey.

Leading the Americans against the enemy's left flank was Brigadier-General Leonard Covington. After his men had successfully driven back the Canadian first line and as they were advancing on the second, Covington, in the lead, was struck in the abdomen by a sharp-shooter's fire. Severely wounded, he was removed from the field and carried by boat as the flotilla crossed back into American territory.

When Covington died of his wounds on November 13th, he was buried outside a block-house in French Mills, New York. The block-house was named Fort Covington in his honor and the village which eventually grew up around it retained the name.

As news of his demise spread, eulogies, poems and biographies made their appearances in one publication after another. All paid homage to his bravery and patriotism and recounted events in his military and political career. He was labelled "generous and humane and a man of distinguished talents....those who fought by his side, will ever revere his memory." As "one of the very best officers in the service....He had....great practical knowledge of all that appertains to a military life, and his loss....will be severely felt by his country." The Fifth Volume of Niles' Weekly Register in Baltimore was "mournfully but respectfully dedicated" by the editor "to the memory of

LEONARD COVINGTON, Brigadier-General, who 'fell where he fought, at the head of his men.'"

By the time the British made their attack on Baltimore in September 1814, a second Fort Covington had been erected, this one on the west branch of the Patapsco, a backup to the larger, more prominent Fort McHenry. The intense fire from its guns, during the famous bombardment, thwarted a British attempt to approach Fort McHenry from the rear. Its 2-3/4 acres were sold by the United States government in 1869, but when the Western Maryland Railroad built its tidewater terminals on the site in 1904, the facility was called "Port Covington," a name it retains to the present.

In the two decades following the General's death, many places were named in his honor, the best known, perhaps, being Covington, Kentucky, established in 1815. How little the General could have imagined, on his visits to Cincinnati, that the second largest city in Kentucky would someday lie on the opposite side of the Ohio River and bear his name.

Seven years after his death, Covington's body was removed from its grave, carried to Sackett's Harbor and re-buried in the military cemetery with full honors. The site became known as Mount Covington. Today, unfortunately, no one knows the exact location of his last resting place.

St. George's Day, 1989