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Maps of the First Survey of the Potomac River, 1736-1737

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MAPS OF THE FIRST SURVEY OF THE POTOMAC RIVER, 1736-1737

By JAMES W. FOSTER

When the Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore a few months ago took over as a permanent deposit from the Maryland Academy of Sciences a collection of maps, both printed and manuscript, there came to light two complementary plats of the Potomac River drawn in 1736-1737 by order of the commissioners appointed to survey the boundaries of Lord Fairfax's immense estate, the Northern Neck of Virginia. Since they must have been among the original documents on which William Mayo acting for the Crown commission and John Warner on behalf of the Fairfax representatives based their maps of the Northern Neck¹ and because they furnish various details not shown on either of these, they possess no little historical importance. Nor is their interest as examples of early local cartography unmatched in other respects, for few streams of America have afforded grounds for more continued controversy than the Potomac. As a matter of

¹*A map of the Northern Neck in Virginia, The Territory of the Right Honourable Thomas Lord Fairfax; Situate betwixt the Rivers Potomack and Rappahannock, according to a late Survey; Drawn in the year 1737, by Wm. Mayo.*

A true and accurate survey of the Rivers Rappahannock and Patomack to their first heads or Springs done by order of the Commissioners as well on the part of His Majesty as the Lord Fairfax . . . Drawn by John Warner [1737].

fact, one of the maps has been found pertinent to current litigation in a Federal Court.

The plats bear the following legends:

PLAN OF THE UPPER PART OF POTOMACK RIVER CALLED COHONGOROTO. SURVEY'D IN THE YEAR 1736 [Signed:] BENJ. WINSLOW.

Pen drawing with ink wash representing mountains and other physical features. $42\frac{1}{2}$ x 16 inches. Scale $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the inch.

A PLAN OF POTOMACK RIVER, FROM THE MOUTH OF SHERRENDO, DOWN TO CHAPAWAM-SICK, SURVEYED IN THE YEAR 1737. [Signed:] RO[BERT] BROOKE.

Pen drawing. $17\frac{1}{2}$ x $24\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Scale $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the inch.

While it is here proposed to discuss only the first of these drafts, it may not be amiss to review briefly the purposes for which they were prepared. The circumstances are nowhere so fully or pithily set forth as in the account of Colonel William Byrd who, as one of the commissioners appointed by Governor Gooch on a royal order to meet with commissioners named by Lord Fairfax, has left a narrative of marked style and force if not of judicial impartiality.² Though it was Fairfax who had precipitated action by petitioning the king for a joint commission to survey and fix the boundaries of his enormous demesne, upon the naming of the Crown negotiators, he changed his mind, doubtless feeling that his interests would be safer if left to a royal commission in England where the rights of a peer might be expected to enjoy higher esteem than in the American wilderness, and empowered his commissioners merely to survey the boundaries and take testimony regarding the accepted limits. His appointees were Charles Carter, William Beverley and William Fairfax. Governor Gooch on behalf of the Crown commissioned, besides Byrd, John Robinson and John Grymes.

It will be recalled that the origin of the boundary disputes lay in grants made both by the Governor of Virginia and by Lord Fairfax in the fork of the Rappahannock River, but their ultimate cause was the equivocal expression used in the royal letters patent running in the name of Fairfax's ancestor, Thomas, Lord Culpeper, *viz.*, "all that intire tract . . . bounded by and within the

² *The Proceedings of the Commissioners Appointed to Lay out the Bounds of the Northern Neck, lying between the Rivers Potomack and Rappahannock. Anno 1736* in William Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line and Other Tracts*, Richmond, 1866, Vol. II, pp. 83-139.

first Heads or Springs of the Rivers . . . Rappahannock, & . . . Potomack & by the Courses of the said Rivers from their said first Heads or Springs (as they are commonly called or known by the Inhabitants & Discriptions of those parts) and the Bay of Chesapeyock . . .” Thus charged with responsibility to locate the head springs of these rivers, the commissioners entered with seeming assurance upon a task that in the case of the Potomac remains, strictly speaking, uncompleted to the present day.³

The joint commission met on September 25, 1736, at Fredericksburg where, according to the voucher for their expenses, they were not indifferent, while considering the controversial aspects of their task, to the joys of the table. During the five days of the conference they consumed substantial quantities of claret, madeira, beer, tea, punch and liquor, while “sundry liquors for woodsmen and surveyors” ran to more than £11. With lodgings for so many and “stableage” for 19 horses to provide, Master John Gordon, innkeeper, was able to collect 24 pistoles—for this hamlet a very harvest of gold.⁴ As agreed, expenses were borne equally by the two sides. Before the deliberations were concluded instructions were issued to the surveyors and two field parties were organized, one for each river.

Surveyors selected by the Gooch commission were William Mayo and Robert Brooke who, “in Conjunction with Mr. Winslow and Mr. John Savage on my Lord’s part, shou’d run the Courses & measure the distance of the Branch of Potomack called Co-

³ The question as to which branch of the Potomac is actually the main stream (the south is the longer and to some therefore the true head) is only a part of the controversy, now left largely to historians. The North Branch, acceptance of which by the courts is based on the right of prescription, has two head springs. Marylanders believe that a southerly spring instead of the true one farther west was settled upon in error by the surveyors of 1736. A claim not without justification is thus made out to the effect that Maryland has lost to West Virginia, if the other North Branch spring be taken as the true source, some thousands of acres, or, if the head spring of the South Branch be determined on, a half million acres.

Mr. W. B. Marye recently found among the Calvert papers in the Maryland Historical Society library a sketch map of the Potomac drawn in 1721 by Philemon Lloyd of Annapolis. The map has been reproduced and described in the *Magazine* of the Society, Vol. XXX, p. 1-11. Based upon information furnished by an Indian trader, it is remarkable for its general accuracy though far from truth in its details. It differs from Winslow’s plat in that the name Kahun-guluta (Cohongorooto) is given to the North Fork of the Potomac and not to the entire stream above the Shenandoah confluence; and the South Fork is regarded as the principal stream, its origin being designated “ye fountain head of Patowmeck.” Opinion as to which was the proper head stream in that day seems to have depended upon which side of the river one lived on. It so continues today.

⁴ *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, I:227.

haungoruton, from its confluence with Sharando [or Sherrendo, *i. e.*, Shenandoah] to the Head Spring thereof, with Orders to return an Exact map of the said River, shewing all the Streams that run into the same on either side."⁵

When the conference ended the Potomac party of seventeen, including besides the surveyors, Mr. Ashby, pilot and steward, six chain carriers and as many more of undesignated duties, with the instruments and a large store of provisions set out, being the first to take the field because they "had much farthest to go."⁶

With the joint expedition which undertook the survey of the upper Rappahannock and its branches we are not here concerned, though the quarrels in which their respective employers engaged make up no small part of the record. Their plans, like the field notes of the Potomac expedition, are missing.⁷

While the commissioners on both sides collected depositions from early settlers on the two rivers, the Mayo-Winslow party began its tedious progress westward along the Potomac. That this group of many various elements did not function smoothly at the outset is scarcely surprising. A letter to the surveyors from Carter and Fairfax under date of November 17, accuses them of dilatoriness and quarreling, disabuses them of the notion that they are to be paid by the day, informs them that Mr. Ashby (who had apparently quit the expedition) reported that on October 18, the party was but four miles above the Shenandoah's mouth. ". . . We heartily wish you may finish your Survey as those employed on Rappahannock have long since done, without any complaints of ill usage to their Pilots and Chainmen. The surveyors appointed on Rappahannock compleated their Work almost as soon as you began."⁸

On the other hand fault had earlier been found with the Rappahannock surveyors, likewise accused of slackness, and a sharp reproof had been sent them by the joint commission.⁹ In noting how one field party was thus played off against the other,

⁵ Byrd, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷ Every student of Northern Neck history must acknowledge his debt to Fairfax Harrison, who, in *Landmarks of Old Prince William*, Richmond, 1924, has written the definitive account not only of a great mother county but of most of Northern Virginia as well. The statement concerning the lost documents is but one of many borrowed (Vol. II, page 619n) from Chapter 32, entitled: "Maps and Map-makers," also published in *William and Mary College Quarterly*, 2nd Series, Vol. IV, pages 1 to 15 (Jan. 1924), and in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. XXX, pp. 323-340 (Oct. 1922).

⁸ *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, I:227-228.

⁹ Byrd, *op. cit.*, p. 104. The letter bears date Oct. 5, 1736.

one surmises that both were the butts for antagonisms that ran high beneath the polished exteriors of the leading planters who composed the commission. Before the business was finished sharp accusations had been exchanged by the principals, supplying titbits all the more welcome to the coffee tables of Williamsburg because some of the participants were members of the Council. Added piquancy was found in the fact that Beverley on the one side was a nephew of Byrd on the other.¹⁰

The severe hardships encountered by the Potomac party are characteristically described by Byrd:

"And here I think I ought to do Justice not only to the uncommon Skill, but also to the Courage and Indefatigable Industry of Majr. Mayo and two of the other Surveyors, employ'd in this long and difficult Task. Neither the unexpected Distance, nor the Danger of being doubly Starved by Hunger and excessive Cold, could in the least discourage them from going thro' with Their Work, tho' at one time they were almost reduced to the hard necessity of cutting up the most useless Person among them, Mr. Savage, in order to Support and save the lives of the rest. But Providence prevented that dreadful blow by an unexpected Supply another way, and so the Blind Surveyor escap't."

If the blunt force of these remarks induces acceptance at face value, as it does so far as concerns hunger and cold, let it be remembered that Byrd, "master of polemical irony," as Fairfax Harrison has called him, could deliver thrusts as cruel as they were well-placed. In view of the fact that only a few months had elapsed since Savage's selection to make the survey and since the next year, when he was voted the sum of £15 as compensation by the Council of Virginia,¹¹ he held the post of surveyor of Stafford County,¹² there is little doubt that Byrd indulged in gross exaggeration as to the state of his eye-sight. Nor should it be forgotten that the Colonel's observations were among personal papers, written without thought of publication. That he proved

¹⁰ See the letter of Beverley to William Fairfax referring to "my Uncle Byrd" in *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, I:228.

¹¹ *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XIV:11 (July, 1906). This was probably for his survey of Stafford County. The resulting map, now in the Coast and Geodetic Survey library, is inferior in execution to the Potomac maps of Winslow and Brooke.

¹² Savage received the sum of £100 from Lord Fairfax for his work on the survey of the upper Potomac (*Calendar of Va. State Papers*, I:230). Doubtless this was his full compensation. Mayo was allowed £120 by the Virginia Council, but this seems to have included remuneration for the duplicate maps he prepared. (*Virginia Magazine*, XIV:31-32). No record of payment to Winslow has been found but we may infer that it was about the same as Savage's.

himself master, too, of the art of suspense will be agreed, for the passage quoted engenders quick anxiety to know whether the "unexpected Supply" may have been the kind that walked on four legs or only on two.

When the party finally reached the head waters of the Potomac, it settled upon a spring close to the summit of the Alleghenies in what is now West Virginia as the official source of the River, more than 200 miles from the mouth of the Shenandoah. It was doubtless well into the winter when the last bearings were taken and the gear packed for the long trek home. A voucher for payment of two of the chainbearers, signed by Winslow, Savage and Carter is dated December 29, in all probability soon after the return.

Winslow as a competent draftsman was doubtless deputized by his fellow surveyors to make the map and completed it during the winter, for its date, 1736, indicates that it was finished prior to March 25, *i. e.* New Year's Day, 1737.

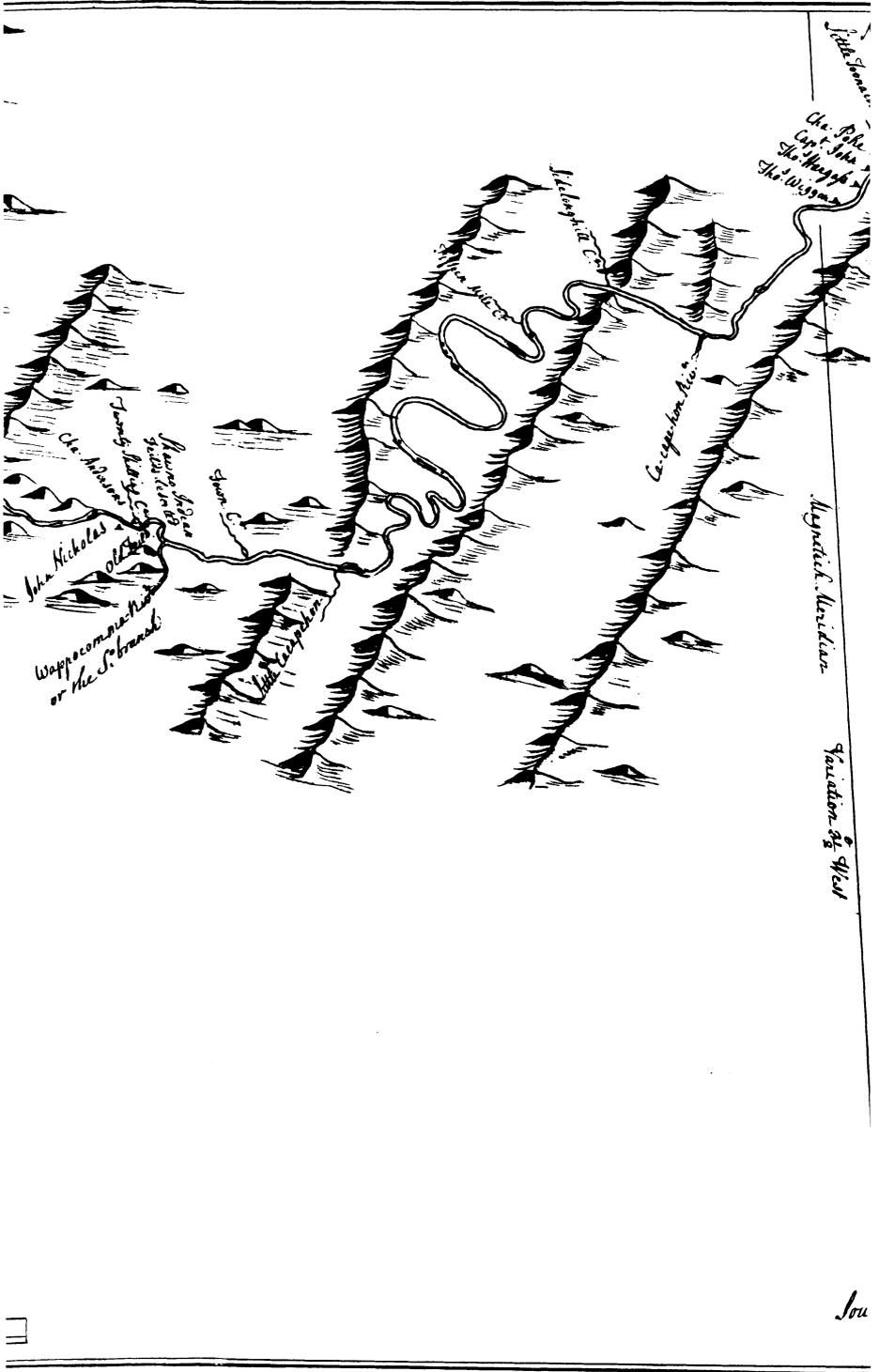
Upon completion of the various field surveys, Mayo was instructed by the Gooch commission to prepare in duplicate a complete map of the Northern Neck by "joining all the particular surveys together." The result Byrd calls a "masterly performance," and such it undoubtedly was, for when laid before the Lords of Trade in England it was found more satisfactory than the map on a larger scale prepared by Warner for Lord Fairfax.¹³ It need scarcely be observed that the latter in due course secured recognition of all his claims, which were finally marked upon the ground by the survey of Jefferson and Brooke in 1746.

Unfortunately no real end to the point at issue was reached for the question of the actual first spring of the Potomac River, on which hinged the destiny of hundreds of square miles of land, has ever since been a bone of contention. So far as state boundaries are concerned, it was finally settled by decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in the case of Maryland vs. West Virginia¹⁴ (217 U. S. 1 and 217 U. S. 577, 1910), whereby the findings of the 1737 survey with regard to the adoption of a particular spring were ratified.

As will be seen by reference to the reproduction herewith, the Winslow plan is quite detailed in respect to the River, its islands, tributaries and the abutting plantations, some of which

¹³ Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 620.

¹⁴ In the first of these decisions is to be found an excellent summary of the long-standing controversy. See also 174 U. S. 196. The Court confirmed the right of Maryland to the bed of the river as far as the low-water line on the Virginia shore.



John Nicholas

Wappocomac
or the S. branch

John Nicholas
Wappocomac
or the S. branch

Old Church

James River

Sandy Ridge

the S. branch

Allegheny Mts

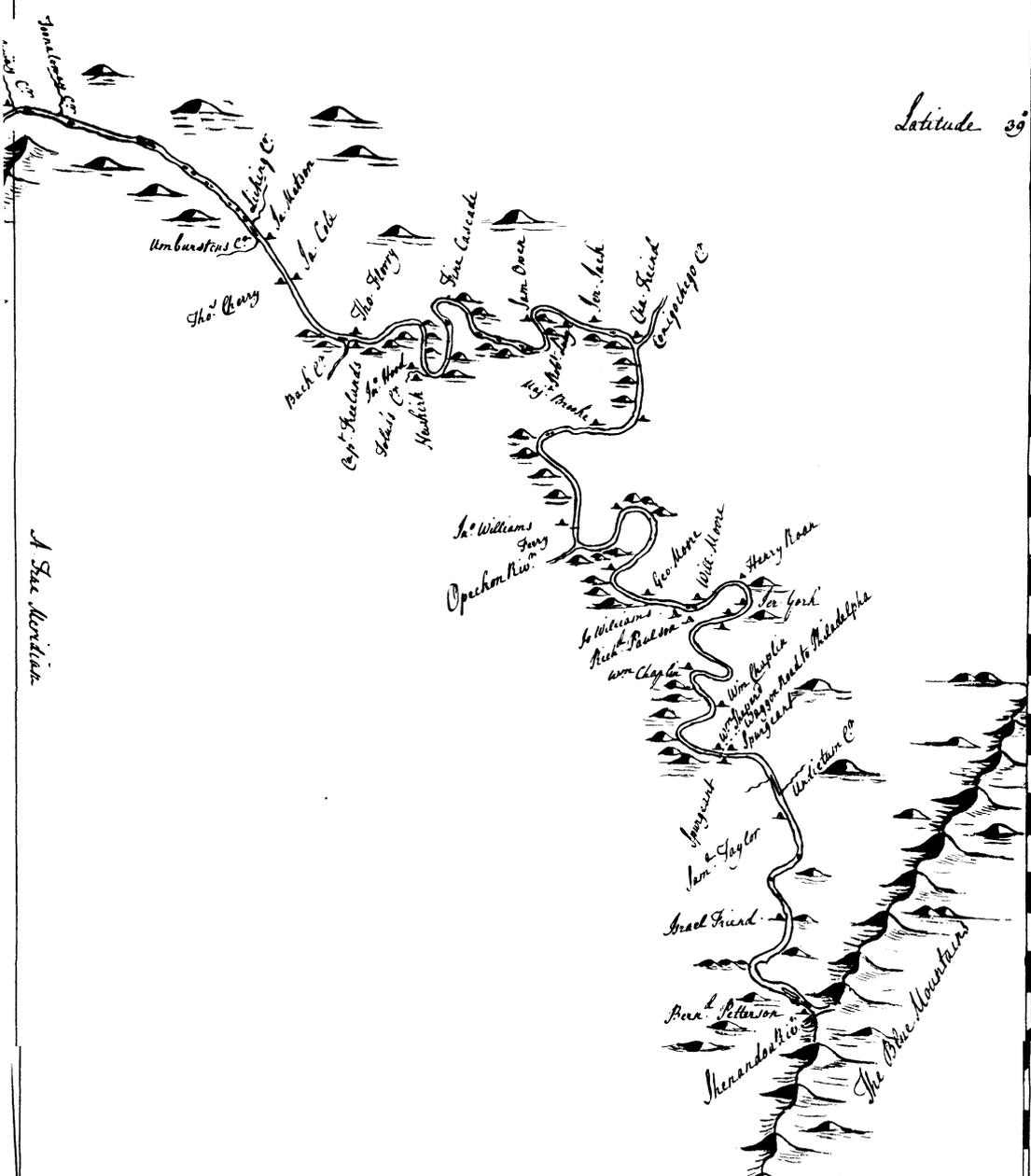
Appalachian Mts

Appalachian Mts

Allegheny Mts

Jou

North



Latitude 39

A True Meridian

A Plan of the upper Part of Otonnack River
 called Chongrooto Survey'd in the Year
 1736.
 By Wm. Snow.

fail to appear on the general maps. Here set down with some exactness are the former Shawnee settlements near the present Oldtown, Cumberland, and Cresap, in Alleghany County, Maryland, which had been deserted a few years before. Indications of "colemines" at two points adjacent to the River in what is now Garrett County, Maryland, between Kitzmiller and Barnum, West Virginia, supply what is believed to be the earliest known evidence of coal deposits in this region.¹⁵ The South Branch of the River appears as a smallish affluent, designated as "Wappocomma River or the South Branch," in this respect evidencing the belief of the joint party that the North Branch because of its greater width was the main stream.¹⁶ The destination of the waters of the Youghiogeny River is accurately stated in a legend at the northwest corner of the map.

Considering the time and place, the plan is remarkably competent cartography, and affords evidence of quite accurate surveying performed in the heart of a wilderness amid exposure to not too friendly savages.¹⁷ It was executed, of course, with no other instruments than the theodolite and the surveyor's compass, the method of triangulation not having come into use till near the close of the century. Nevertheless, to take but one of its striking features, the various meanders of the upper Potomac are found faithfully laid down when compared with modern maps. The legend like all the names upon the map itself is in script, evidently the handwriting of Winslow, for whose pains in setting down many details that might have been overlooked we are under obligations. It is a matter of regret that biographical information regarding him is scant in the extreme. All we know is that late in 1737 he was engaged in surveying and seating, along with others, a 30,000-acre tract west of the Shenandoah, that in 1739 he was

¹⁵ Statement of Professor Edward B. Mathews of Johns Hopkins University to whom, as well as to Colonel Lawrence Martin, head of the Division of Maps in the Library of Congress, the writer is under obligation for criticism and suggestions.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that Mayo omitted from his map, the only one submitted on behalf of the Province of Virginia for decision in England, mention of the South Branch of the Potomac. In setting down the Wappocomma River, he gave no hint that it could be regarded as a branch of the Potomac. One surmises that this variation from Winslow's plat was determined by policy. Between Lord Baltimore and Lord Fairfax the Virginia commissioners had reasons of long standing not to favor the Maryland side.

¹⁷ This was more than seven years before the Lancaster Treaty with the Six Nations (1744) under which right of the white man to settle as far west as the forks of the Potomac was recognized.

appointed sheriff of Essex County¹⁸ and that when Peter Jefferson and Major Brooke in 1746 made their survey of the Fairfax "back line," joining the two head springs, he was one of their assistant surveyors.¹⁹

Comparison of the Mayo and Warner maps, reproductions of which from the Public Record Office, London, are in the Library of Congress and the Virginia Historical Society, with Winslow's manuscript reveals their failure to include some of the names of Potomac tributaries and a few names of settlers. In other respects the basic surveys were closely followed by the respective makers of the general maps, though in the case of Mayo, on a reduced scale.

Age considered, the condition of both new-found plats is excellent. If we may judge by photostat copies, each is fresher and more legible than the Mayo and Warner manuscripts in London. Save for the action of ink acids where the borders were drawn in, there is neither hole nor tear in either surface.²⁰

Attempts to learn the provenance of the two manuscripts has proved a fascinating if all but fruitless endeavor. Although the Maryland Academy of Sciences claims 1797 as the year of its founding, it was at first without formal organization and suffered at least two rebirths, not to speak of a fire in 1835 and the closing of its gallery and distribution of its possessions within the next decade. Outliving these misfortunes, it has only recently endured another period of stress, with three changes of executive director in eight years. It is scarcely to be wondered that records are incomplete and its officers uncertain of the origin of some of its materials. Examining a partial record of gifts, the present writer found under date of January 15, 1878, the presentation of a "large library, 162 bound volumes, 210 unbound do. and pamphlets, 90 maps" by Mrs. Ph. T. Tyson. It is not only possible but highly probable that the last item embraced the two maps with which we are concerned. Philip T. Tyson, late president of the Academy who had died childless only a month earlier, was one of the most distinguished scientists of Maryland. He had served as state agricultural chemist, was the author of papers on mineralogy and allied topics and an associate of John H. Alexander in early geological surveys of Maryland. In his first report as state chemist (1860), stressing the need of a geological map of the

¹⁸ *Virginia Magazine*, XIV:18 (July, 1906) and XIV:341 (Apr., 1907).

¹⁹ He is one of four surveyors named upon the map.

²⁰ The two maps were drawn on identically watermarked paper but the inks differed as well as the quills used.

state, he refers to the "want of a correct geographical map. To supply this deficiency I have collected all the useful data within my reach . . ." It may be that the valuable plats of Winslow and Brooke were among the materials he gathered. At any rate, search of the Academy's printed records and interviews with present and former members of its staff have afforded no better hypothesis.

Also included among the one hundred or so items placed in the care of the Pratt Library is a considerable group of manuscript maps by Alexander, Maryland's first topographical engineer, who deserves a place in the cartographical hall of fame by reason of the fact that he was second, if not indeed the first, in America to adopt contour lines to indicate elevations. His maps, dated 1835 or thereabouts, of great beauty and unbelievable fineness of line, were received by the Academy about twelve years ago. It is known that no eighteenth century plans were among them. The close association of these two men with the upper Potomac is interestingly emphasized by the fact that they organized in 1837 the George's Creek Coal and Iron Company to exploit the resources of the Lonaconing area. Alexander became president and Tyson superintendent of the Company. The latter is credited with discovery of the great fourteen-foot seam on George's Creek.

That there have thus been recovered and made accessible to the world of scholarship documents representing results of the first complete survey of the Potomac is a matter of gratification beyond the bounds of the states and the District of Columbia which have immediate interest in them. It seems not too much to say that the survey marked an epoch in geographic investigation of America by the English, for though John Lederer in 1669-1670, Abraham Wood in 1671, Cadwalader Jones in 1682 and Spotswood in 1716 had penetrated the mountain barrier, no expedition down to this time seems to have accomplished at once so exact and so extended an examination into the interior. At all events we can be assured that succeeding explorers, including Christopher Gist and George Washington, profited by the able work performed in the upper Potomac survey of 1736.