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A Biography of Richard Dennis (1770-1845)

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A BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD DENNIS.

1770-1845

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BY PAUL CONNER

FOR DR. WARLICK HIS 300

NOVEMBER 21, 1990

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Abstract

Richard Dennis

Richard Dennis, son of John Dennis and Mary Jacque (maiden name), was born in the state of New Jersey in 1770. During Richard's lifetime he made his way south into the state of Georgia where he established himself within Savannah as a merchant. By 1800 Dennis was fully active in the local business society and town government. If duty called then Richard Dennis answered because, not only was he a successful merchant but Dennis was appointed commander of the local Savannah militia. Dennis had fruitful ten year period in Savannah until for one reason and another he evacuated the city. Sources support the idea that Dennis ventured into states such as Pennsylvania and Kentucky. Whatever his reason was for leaving he did in fact continue his career as a merchant. On & November 1845, after three marriages and the births of three children, Richard Dennis died in the state of Kentucky.

The Method of Research

The research was going to be demanding, but I knew ultimately it would be a pleasure. In time this belief proved to be correct. My research began at the Chatham County Courthouse where I consulted the local deeds of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This technique produced positive information that I will use within the text. The Armstrong State College and public libraries were also greatly helpful in producing large quantities of old historic newspaper data but, more helpful than all the other institutions was the Georgia Historical Society. The sources within its walls painted a picture of a man that had a hot temper and was a persistent merchant. There, I consulted the manuscripts, newspapers, local historian materials and a library which contained massive quantities of information on the state of Georgia. All of these resources assisted me in creating a biography on Richard Dennis, and I must say the actual research turned into an enlightenment.

Introduction

This study will cover information in certain aspects of Richard Dennis's life. The areas covered will be business, political and military. Dennis was in fact active in each of these categories. Also, I will attempt to discuss certain conflicts, rumors and legends surrounding Richard Dennis. Towards the end of this study, the family information will be discussed in detail followed by a personal interview with as local ancestor.

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Business Life

According to the local sources such as deeds and manuscripts, Richard Dennis arrived on the scene around 1794. Within the Chatham County Superior Court I found deeds with Dennis's name attached to them as far back as the date mentioned. However, the deed that seemed more promising was the one that displayed names such as Richard M. Stites, Samuel Stackhouse and T. F. Williams. It seemed that in 1801 Richard Dennis owned a house located on Reynolds Square and Richard M. Stites apparently wanted to purchase this home. Dennis, for a sum of five hundred dollars was willing to make this transaction possible. "Received on the day of the date hereof from the within named Richard M. Stites the sum of Five hundred Dollars money of the United States in full of the consideration within mentioned".¹ The consideration mentioned was the purchase of the house marked "V" on the current city map.² After consulting the "Savannah Atlas", I located the half city block marked V.³ I personally attempted to locate this home and to my surprise the famous Savannah Fink House sat upon this block. I have no official source proving that this house was in fact sold to Richard M. Stites by Dennis but, the lot under the home was in fact in the buyer's hands on 11 March 1801. The signatures at the end of the deeds were normal but one aspect remained constant. The names Samuel Stackhouse and T. F. Williams continuously reappeared in the witness sections of the deed. In consulting the "Richard Dennis

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papers, I found that Samuel Stackhouse had several legal and business transactions with Dennis.⁴ Learning this I speculated that Stackhouse was a local merchant or plantation owner. Furthermore, the Dennis papers proved a transaction was performed in 1809 involving two negro slaves which Stackhouse paid eight hundred dollars in full to T. F. Williams.⁵

It appeared that these three individuals, Dennis, Williams and Stackhouse did business together quite frequently. Still, name T. F. Williams remained vague until I ran across several articles in the local historic newspaper the "Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser.⁶

This newspaper contained advertisements entitled "Dennis and William".⁷ In these sections Dennis and Williams offered to sell items from "Jamaica Rum" to "Bar Iron".⁸ This type of information was periodically printed in the year 1802 throughout the newspaper. At this point I realized that T. F. Williams did in fact share business with Richard Dennis.

Not only were Dennis and William merchants but according to the "Richard Dennis Papers" these tow men practiced accounting as well. Richard M. Stites married Richard Dennis's sister Harriet, and from that union he became a relative as well as a customer. This source supplied an account itemized statement that bore the names of Dennis and Williams at the top. On the right hand corner of the statement it read "To Richard M. Stites".⁹ The account statement covered various items and people to which Stites had paid off or was still indebted. In reading through

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this document I stumbled across the words, "purchase Lot letter V....500.00".¹⁰Now, not only was the earlier deed justified but the information was recorded again proving the transaction. In speculation its possible that Stites and his wife Harriet lived in this house on Reynolds Square currently known as the Pink House.

Around 1804 or 1805 Richard Dennis left Savannah; although he wasn't physically present, his penmanship still invaded the legal sectors of Savannah. Documented proof of the action can be found in the "John Macpherson Berrien manuscripts".11 Berrien was a predominant lawyer and politician who lived in Savannah around the same time as Richard Dennis. During the War of 1812 Berrien was active with a Georgia unit of light dragoons and later with the 1st Cavalry. Berrien was also active in the national povernment as well. Chief Justice Marshall called him the "American Cicero" and the "Honey-tongued Georgia youth".¹² All in all despite his national fame his presence in Savannah seemed very important to Richard Dennis. In these manuscripts I found several letters dealing with some type of legal transaction between Dennis and another individual. Berrien played the obvious part of lawyer, or in other words the letters were not specifically addressed to him. Dennis seemed to be writing from Germantown, New York on 12 October 1839,¹³ In the document Dennis is discussing an amount of land, 530,000 acres to be exact, that seems to be creating some type of conflict. The other parties involved are "C & M creditors, Peter Mitchell and a

Major Delafield".14 Dennis claims that a certain part of the land should belong to a "Christe Vermily".¹⁵ But the second party thinks otherwise. Berrien intercedes at this point and claims that the land cannot be settled, "because no title could be drawn up with the presence of the uncertainty of the land".¹⁶ Out of 530,000 acres of land 100,000 have been abstracted and sold to a Peter Mitchell. Dennis claims "that no one had the authority to conduct this transaction" therefore, "Peter Mitchell's authority is invalid".¹⁷

As we can observe in the manuscripts, Richard Dennis played an active role in the business society of Savannah. Even after his departure his influence remained constant, this may have been effected by the presence of family contacts within the city.

Political and Civil Life

Richard Dennis had several political and legal acquaintances that could have influenced certain situations for him. For example, according to the local newspaper Richard M. Stites was in fact the "legal clerk of the Georgia District".¹⁸ In the year 1799 information written by Stites can be found in the District Attorney's column G. Woodruff. And of course, in the "John Macpherson Berrien manuscripts", once again Dennis claims to admire the character of the lawyer.¹⁹ Did Berrien use his political and legal influence for his own purposes? Upon speculation I feel more than likely he did, but on a positive note, hopefully within the realm of the law.

Richard Dennis periodically took on the responsibility of civic duty. In the "Columbian Museum and Savanna Advertiser" on 19 February 1802 we find a list of members on the "Grand Jury".20 Dennis is in fact one of the members. The column withholds cases on which the jury passed verdicts and legislation. Some of these cases have future business implications. Could Dennis have influenced these decisions of the jury? I feel it is highly possible. Although I found no hard evidence of the behavior, from the sources I read this man's character struck me as strong and persistent.

Military Life

To serve in some type of military unit was not uncommon to Richard Dennis. In the late 1790s Dennis became a part of the "Chatham Hibernian Fusiliers", and served as commander of that unit.²¹ This unit was made up of volunteers from the Savannah area. Gordon B. Smith's <u>Coastal Military Units</u> gave detailed descriptions on the organization of these units. "These volunteers were known as the uniformed militia. Also jokingly called 'bucks of the blood', these companies grew from the independent companies of the light infantry, grenadiers, riflemen, fusiliers, horse and artillery formed by the voluntary association of men who purchased their own distinctive uniforms. Their membership exempted them from general militia companies".²² The Fusiliers were a light infantry originated in 1749. The company was redesignated as the Chatham Hibernian Fusiliers in 1800. By 1803 the unit was totally disbanded. Newspaper sources tell us of Richard Dennis's social activity within this unit. The newspaper announces the Fusilier's anniversary which was 17 February 1801, and describes a reception held in the day's honor. "The members partook in elegant entertainment prepared for the occasion, which the following toast were drank".²³ The article goes on to describe each toast independently.

By 1802 Richard Dennis's military career had progressed somewhat. On 16 March Dennis was elected Major of the "1st

Battalion 1st Regiment Georgia militia" whose headquarters resided in Savannah.²⁴ Dennis's battalion orders can be periodically found throughout the local newspapers. In the month of February 1803, the city of Savannah was preparing for a parade. Dennis in fact wasted no time as he ordered, "the officers will have their men up to standard on equipment and form at the church square at 11'o'clock".²⁵ These orders were given on 1 February 1803 sixteen days prior to the parade. Where exactly was the main church square in Savannah around 1803? The researchers don't exactly know, but if we use the historic "Christ Church" for example, we can figure out just how far and what route Major Dennis travelled to a muster.²⁶ Sources tell us that Dennis resided at a home located at Lincoln and Bryan Streets.²⁷ If a muster was called, the major would have had to walk or ride a good four blocks. Either Dennis wasn't much on exercise, or he was considerate to his men. The latter is doubtful. Nevertheless Richard Dennis proved himself as a military man and depending on his status of occupation he probably participated in the War of 1812. However, I regret that researchers were unable to document this information. Even so, if one was to speculate upon the prior service of Major Richard Dennis, I feel no reservation in believing that he did in fact serve on active duty.

Conflicts and Legends

If there is one aspect I can speculate on and feel confident about it is the personality of Richard Dennis. From studying the manuscripts, legal cases and deeds, I realized that this man was in fact demanding. However, just because someone is demanding doesn't mean he is impatient or violent. This is the attitude I took in the defense of Richard Dennis. However, after stumbling on some revealing information my position shifted somewhat. The "Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser" published an article on 3 September 1799 that described a duel that took place within the local area.²⁸ It seemed that Richard Dennis and another man by the name of Captain "Thomas Robinson" had some type of disagreement that could not be resolved by verbal contrivance.29 Therefore, the two men resorted to a duel that led to consequences for both individuals. The contest took place at an area called Powell's Hook. As to whether or not this area is located in Savannah, the researcher was unable to obtain this information. Furthermore, both men met and wounded each other in the head. This gave me an idea of how serious Richard Dennis was. Apparently neither of the men died from the duel and the source did not mention that the two individuals faced each other again.³⁰ In light of speculation I feel that this activity was common in the life of Richard Dennis. One just doesn't pick up the habit of dueling and come away with a head shot. It would probably be safe to say that dueling was more commonplace during

the early 1800s, therefore, Dennis had no legal action taken against him.

However, according to newspaper sources Dennis was not short of being processed by the law. It seemed that Dennis did some travelling between Savannah and Charleston, South Carolina during his temporary sojourn. According to the "Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser", Dennis owned a "Carolina Coffee Shop" located on Tradd Street within Charleston. ³¹A Mr. Shaw, presumably from Savannah, visited this coffee shop and tried to leave without paying his bill. Dennis confronted Shaw about the situation and the matter remained resolved. However, Richard Dennis obtained a young eighteen year old son by the same name. The source refers to him as "Jun".³² Richard Dennis "Jun" exchanged earlier threatening words with Mr. Shaw which resulted in a "thrashing".³³The young Dennis filled with anger laid waiting within Mr. Shaw's home. Once Shaw returned, Richard Dennis "Jun" surprisingly shot and killed him. The young murderer was apprehended immediately by the "Justice Bentham". 34 To the amazement of the researcher, Richard Dennis Senior was also found lurking within the house with loaded pistols. Because of this he was arrested; "on examining him a pair of loaded pistols were found in his pockets. In consequences of this he was also committed". 35

Can the acceptance of violence within a post-revolutionary society explain the behavior of Richard Dennis. This idea opens itself to research of future historians. Nevertheless Richard

Dennis did in fact, like many other men of his day, mix violence with business and personal situations.

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Family Life

Richard Dennis spent the majority of his adolescence years in the state of New Jersey. But once in his mid twenties his journey towards the southern states had begun. On 11 July 1797 it is recorded that Richard Dennis married an "Eliza Jane Williams".36 Dennis was now twenty seven years old and had been in Savannah about two years. The marriage was performed by Reverend Walter Monteith. But after a few months the relationship became extremely tragic because Eliza died in 1798.³⁷ Dennis remained a widower for about four years . On 25 November 1802 Richard Dennis married once more, this time to a Harriet Eliza Buffield of Philadelphia. Bishop White of Savannah performed the ceremony. This marriage only lasted about three years because Harriet did in 1805. At this point the researcher speculated that Dennis may have felt rather unfortunate and that marriage wasn't cut out for him. Nevertheless, Dennis married once again, this time to a Susan Salter Smith presumably of New York. This is where Dennis had relocated at the time. The marriage was consecrated on 14 January 1806.³⁸ Regrettably, I was unable to document the number of years the marriage lasted. However, the "Dennis Family manuscripts" explained that Richard Dennis died unmarried. ³⁹

How many children did Richard Dennis have? According to my

sources only three, John S. Dennis, Richard Dennis Jr., and Harriet Dennis. It is not clear who the mothers of Richard and Harriet were, but the oldest son John can be linked to Susan Salter Smith. In the "Daily Georgian", an obituary was printed concerning the death of John S. Dennis. The article explained that the eldest son of Col Richard Dennis died on 1 October 1839 and that the was twenty eight years old.⁴⁰ According to my calculations that would put John S. Dennis birth year at about 1811. If this is correct his mother would be Susan Salter Smith, the third and last wife of Richard Dennis.

Richard Dennis's daughter Harriet was married to a Peter Guerard formerly from South Carolina. Here is an announcement of their wedding taken from the "Daily Georgian". "On Thursday evening last by the Rev. Alnal Carter. Peter Guerard Esq. to Harriet daughter of Colonel Richard Dennis".⁴¹ Notice here that Richard Dennis is ranked no longer Major. Therefore, something can be said about his miliary career at this point. It's possible that the War of 1812 influenced Dennis's loyalty to the armed forces.

I discussed earlier where Richard Dennis lived in the military life section, but I didn't go into detail on the history of the house itself. The home was located at 25-27 Lincoln Street, corner St. Julian Street, on rear of "Trust Lot" facing Reynolds Square.⁴² The home was a typical example of a Georgia tenement house. "It was conveyed 1799 by Mayor and Alderman of the City of Savannah to Peter Cattonett".43 This conveyed by

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Cattonett to Richard Dennis in the year 1799. In 1820 Richard Dennis conveyed the home to Richard F. Williams.⁴⁴ The house was a small one story with an attic frame positioned on top of a high brick basement. This was typical of the Dennis family, considering the small number of children, large amounts of space were not needed. I also speculated earlier that Dennis travelled quite a bit, therefore, the need for space is irrelevant.

Personal Interview

During my research I was fortunate enough to run across an individual residing within the Savannah area that was related to Richard Dennis. The man's name was David Humphrey, and upon meeting him I was very impressed with the amount of information he had researched and collected over the years.

Immediately he began talking about his relationship to Richard Dennis. The line back to Dennis in involves four generations of families, Dennis, Millen, Chaplin, and Wright. These generations cover about 190 years.

Richard Dennis was an uncle to Richard Dennis Millen who was born in Savannah in 1801. Millen interest West Point at the age of fourteen and stayed in the navy for about 20 years. Millen was also responsible for founding the Savannah Cadets. Millen married the sister of Richard Dennis, Peggy nee Dennis. Richard Dennis Millen married once again to a Georgia Ann Walsh on 26 February 1850. During this marriage the couple had three children. Augustus Dennis Millen, born 1854, was one of the family mysteries that remains to be solved. Humphrey claims that Augustus travelled quite extensively, and at one point in time he boarded a ship on the east coast headed out to sea and was never heard from again.

Tallulah Clifford Millen was in fact Humphrey's greatgrandmother. She married a man by the name of Peto Chaplin II, from Lady's Island, South Carolina. The marriage took place at the Church of the Cross in Bluffton, South Carolina. Virginia Susan Chaplin, daughter of Tallulah and Peto, was the grandmother of David Humphrey. Virginia married a man by the name of Henry Wright of Charleston. This man was active at the Citadel as a teacher around the 1850s and 60s.

Harriette Tallulah Wright was the daughter of Virginia and Henry. Harriette married John Elies Humphrey who is father to David Humphrey.

This is in fact a long line but it's added to this study to prove the fact that Richard Dennis did exist and reside in the Savannah area. Who can assert if the past had been different would the present be the same.⁴⁵

Epilogue

Richard Dennis did in fact leave a legacy behind his death. There is still more history that needs to be researched to complete a more detailed biography on this subject. The Georgia Historical Society still in fact contains manuscripts on certain families that Dennis had relationships with, be it legal, business or personal. The national archives is one source that will probably shed more light upon Dennis and his activity with the War of 1812. What exactly happened to the son of Richard Dennis involving the Charleston murder of Mr. Shaw? The Charleston Historical Society may in fact be the main source for ' the answer to that question. And finally, why did Richard Dennis end up in Kentucky? The Washington County Courthouse may be of some help to research. That is the last recorded area in which Richard Dennis resided.

End Notes

¹Deed dated 31 March 1802, recorded in the office of the Clerk of the Superior Court of Chatham County, Georgia, in Deed Record Book X, Page 115.

²Deed dated 11 March 1801, recorded in the office of the Clerk of the Superior Court of Chatham County, Georgia, in Deed Record Book X, Page 265.

³<u>Savannah Atlas</u>, 1801 Vol. 2 plate 9, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA

⁴"Richard Dennis Papers", file 846, box 9, folder 139, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga

⁵Ibid.

⁶<u>Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser</u>, 19 March 1802, p. 1, col. 1. This type of information is found periodically during the year of 1802.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹ "Richard Dennis Papers", file 846, box 9, folder 139, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA

¹⁰Ibid

11 "John Macpherson Berrien Paper", 1781-1856, file 67, box 1, folder 4, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA

¹²Dictionary of Georgia Biography, ed., Kenneth Colmen and Charles Stephen Gurr, (The University of Georgia Press Athens, GA 1923) p. 74.

¹³ "John Macpherson Berrien Papers", 1781-1856, file 67, box 1, folder 4, Georiga Historical Society, Savannah, GA.

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¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 3 September 1799, p.3, col 4. ¹⁸"John Macpherson Berrien Papers", 1781-1856, file 67, box 1, folder 4, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah. GA ¹⁹Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 19 February 1802, p.2. col 2. ²⁰Gordon B. Smith, <u>Coastal Military Units</u>, p. 2., Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA ²¹Ibid., p 3. ²²Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 20 February 1801, p.3, Col. i ²³Gordon B. Smith, <u>Coastal Military Units</u>, "The Battalion Commanders Section", Georgia Historical Savannah, GA ²⁴Columbian Museum and Sayannah Advertiser, 1 February 1803, p. 2, col. 5. ²⁵Savannah Atlas, 1801 vol. 2 plate 9, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA ²⁶"Dennis House", file 994, box 7, Folder 101, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA ²⁷Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 3 September 1799, p. 2, col, 2, 3. ²⁸Ibid. 29 Ibid. ³⁰Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser, 24 August 1804, p. 3, col. 3. 31 Ibid. 32 Ibid. 33 Ibid. ³⁴Ibid. ³⁵ "Dennis Family", file 1349, box 17, Dennis folder, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA

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36_{Ibid}.

³⁷Ibid.

38Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

40Ibid.

41"Dennis House", file 994, Box 7, Folder 101, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴David Humphrey, interview held on the geneology of Richard Dennis in relation to David Humphrey, Savannah, GA. 10 November 1990.

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