What Do Molly Bannaky, Mathias Hammond, and Ben Franklin have in Common?"
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- ***Molly Walsh Bannaky, or, A Caveat about Family Lore***

Molly Walsh Bannaky was the grandmother of Benjamin Banneker. What little we know of her life comes down to us through an account first offered by her granddaughter. This narrative of Bannaky's life is recounted in Silvio Bendini's biography of Benjamin Banneker and in a children's book entitled *Molly Bannaky.*

According to the latter version, Walsh was a servant-in-husbandry on a manor in England in the late 17th century. Her chores included milking the cows, but when a cow knocked over and spilled the pail of milk for the second time, Walsh was brought, *the day of the offense*, before the county court, convicted of theft, and sentenced to hang. Being able to read, she was spared the death penalty and sentence to transportation to the colonies instead. Purchased by a planter on the Eastern Shore, Walsh tended the tobacco crops, learned to plow, and in her spare time sewed and nursed the sick. After completing her term as a convict servant in the 1690s, Walsh received freedom dues of an ox, a cart, a plow, two hoes, tobacco and corn seeds, clothing, and a gun. She set off with her possessions to claim the land due to her, somehow ending up in northern Anne Arundel County on the western shore. Within one year, she had built a cabin, planted a crop, and earned enough cash or credit to purchase a slave. Before long, she freed the slave Bannaky and married him.

The only problem with this narrative is that there is no primary evidence to support any of its details – nothing in the court records, in the land records, in parish registers, in rent rolls or debt books, or any of the other sources that historians routinely use to document and interpret the past. Compounding the problem, the narrative describes a set of experiences that are contrary to the normative collective experience that would encompass the lives of most Maryland settlers. Most immigrants, especially women, could not read – how did Molly Walsh, a servant, become an exception? Tobacco planters didn't routinely plow their fields; they girdled the trees and planted tobacco among the stumps. Plowing did not become common until planters began to raise wheat in the 18th century; when they did adopt plowing as a farming technique, men handled the plows, which required more strength than most women possessed. Headrights were abolished in 1683, so it is probable that Walsh would not have been granted even the ***right*** to claim 50 acres of land (which under the headrights system had to be surveyed and patented with payment of the appropriate fees) but would have had to buy land with cash or credit. Freedom dues by law consisted of a shift, one set of outer garments, a new pair of shoes and stockings, an ax and 2 hoes, and 3 barrels of corn: no ox, no cart, no tobacco seeds, no gun. Oxen and carts were still uncommon and relatively expensive possessions – no one was obligated to provide them for a freed servant. Relatively few slaves were being imported into Maryland in the 1680s; Walsh would have been unlikely to outbid well-established planters for those offered for sale. Similar objections can be raised for every other detail of the story of Molly Walsh Bannaky.

The narrative offered undoubtedly offers some kernels of truth, but as handed down over generations, they have been embellished and distorted and refashioned to provide a history that meets the needs of the generations who passed the story along, but not the scrutiny of objective assessment in light of what

we can verify about the past. The story of Molly Walsh Bannaky, although it does not bear directly on the history of the Four Rivers Heritage Area, provides a useful caveat about the necessity to subject oral history to the same standards of evidence and documentation that we require for all historical interpretation.

- ***Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and the Ratification of the Treaty of Paris***

The *Evening Capital* carried a story on 8 October 2008 about the acceptance of Annapolis for the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program. The article included a long-standing and easily-discredited myth about Congress's ratification of the Treaty of Paris, which took place in Annapolis on 14 January 1784. According to the article, and numerous older sources, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams stayed at the Maryland Inn when they were here in Annapolis to vote in favor of ratification.

There's just one small problem with this story – neither man was anywhere in North America, much less in Annapolis. Franklin and Adams, along with John Jay, were the three representatives of the Congress who negotiated the Treaty for the former colonies. But in January 1784 both men were in Europe. Adams had just returned to The Hague, Netherlands from a tour of England with his son, John Quincy Adams; Franklin was in Paris. Franklin returned to America in 1785 and Adams not until 1788.

- ***Annapolis: Athens of America?***

Did anyone in the eighteenth century ever describe Annapolis as the "Athens of America?"

Probably not. No researcher or student of Annapolis history has found any use of the appellation "Athens of America" during the colonial period. The earliest use of the phrase appears to have been by John V. L. McMahon, in his *Historical View of the Government of Maryland*, published in 1831. Referring (on p.258) to the "wealth, fashion, and ambition of the province," McMahon wrote: "Youth, beauty, and intelligence soon chastened these into refinements, and shed around them the most dangerous allurements of pleasure: and Annapolis became, what a modern city now styles herself, the Athens of America. How far it contributed to her moral improvement, or social happiness, we shall not undertake to say."

It is probably through Elihu Riley, lawyer and publisher of Annapolis history during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that the lasting association of the sobriquet with Annapolis came about. Riley opens Annapolis..."Ye Antient Capital of Maryland" (1901) with "the Athens of America" on the first page, "the title by which the city of Annapolis was known throughout the thirteen colonies during the decade preceding the Revolution." He earlier used the phrase in The Ancient City (1887), a name earned, according to Riley, by the "fascinating and dangerous attractions of gayety." "[W]hilst they earned for Annapolis the title of the Athens of America, the chronicles of those times [two or three decades before the Revolution] warrant the belief, that her pleasures, like those of luxurious and

pampered life in all ages, ministered neither to her happiness nor her purity."

What is interesting is how the meaning of the phrase has changed since its usage by McMahon and Riley. Today the phrase is interpreted as associating the culture and society of pre-Revolutionary Annapolis with the arts and learning of ancient Greece. But for McMahon and Riley, the focus is on the potential decadence of luxury and pampered life – ***not*** the virtues embodied in the Athens of Socrates and Plato, Aeschylus and Sophocles, Praxiteles, and others.

- ***Did William Reynolds chase George Washington down the street because Washington flirted with Reynolds's wife?***

This account of Washington's flirtation with Mary Reynolds and subsequent pursuit down Main (then Church) Street by her husband, William Reynolds, appears in a number of secondary works, but cannot be verified by any contemporary evidence. And it flies in the face of the voluminous evidence that does exist about Washington's personality and sense of himself.

Washington is known to have visited Annapolis a half-dozen times during the period when William Reynolds was alive and living in the building now known as Reynolds Tavern. Washington's diaries for the period record where he ate dinner and supper and with whom he lodged – nowhere in these accounts does the name of William Reynolds or a tavern associated with him appear. He eats his meals and spends his nights in the homes of the local elite; the only tavern or similar establishment that he patronized in Annapolis was Mrs. Howard's Coffee House on Church Street.

His diaries for this period do contain one reference to a Mr. Reynolds in proximity to a visit to Annapolis. In May 1773, Washington dined on 11 May at the Coffee House and lodged at the Governor's [Robert Eden]. The following day he again spent in Eden's company, having both dinner and supper with Eden as well as lodging with him. On the 13th, "After breakfast and about 8 oclock set out for Rock Hall, where we arrived [by boat] in two hours and twenty-five minutes[,] dined on board the *Annapolis* at Chestertown and supped and lodged at Mr. Reynold's." So Washington did spend time with a Mr. Reynolds on this visit, but ***not*** William Reynolds of Annapolis.

- ***How old is the Old Treasury Building and how did it get that name?***

Some accounts date the Old Treasury to the 1690s and identify it as the meeting place of the legislature. The delegates were to have assembled in the largest of the three rooms and the council in one of the smaller two – a supposition that defies all logic, given the small size of the building. Nonetheless, the Old Treasury is the oldest surviving public building in Maryland, having been constructed between 1735 and 1737 as the office for the Commissioners for Emitting of Bills of Credit, or the colony's paper money. Hence the iron bars, solid door, and brick floor that still distinguish the building today. After the Revolution, the Treasurer of the Western Shore took over the building some time between 1779 and 1784. Under the Constitution of 1851, the office became simply that of Treasurer, the comparable position for the Eastern Shore having been abolished in 1842. The "Old

Treasury" thus derives from its occupation by the Treasurer's office, rather than the original purpose for which the structure was built. See Morris L. Radoff, *Buildings of the State of Maryland* (1954), pp. 66-70, for a more complete account of the Old Treasury's construction and later use.

- ***Where is Sir Robert Bart Buried?***

Boys Scouts come to Annapolis every spring to answer this question, among others. Their search is complicated by the fact that it is a trick question, although not intended to be. Confusion arises from the fact that there was no such person as Sir Robert Bart. The burial place in question is actually that of Sir Robert Eden, Baronet (abbreviated Bart.), the last proprietary governor of Maryland. Eden, who had left Maryland in June 1776, returned in 1783 seeking to reclaim property that had been confiscated by the state during the Revolutionary War, in particular his house, which continued to be the governor's residence. Eden died on 2 September 1784 at the home of Upton Scott and was buried at the old St. Margaret's Church in Westminster Parish. In 1926, his body was reinterred in the churchyard at St. Anne's in Annapolis.

- ***Mathias Hammond, Jilted by His Fiancée?***

The myth of the jilted Mathias Hammond appears in numerous secondary sources. It is retold, for example, in Rosamund Randall Beirne and John Henry Scarff's biography of William Buckland, architect of Hammond's House. According to their account, Matthias Hammond never lived in his dream house because the lady of his choice jilted him. He retired to his plantation where he died in 1786, a sad end for a promising and ambitious young man. A Hammond family history further elaborates: "The story is that this home, planned and constructed by [Mathias Hammond] for his future wife, finally led to the breaking of their engagement. He became so much interested in the building and its furnishings, which he collected with exquisite taste, that he failed to pay his fiancee the attentions she thought due her. After suffering what she considered his neglect for some time, the young lady finally lost patience and sent her negro servant to return ring and presents to young Mathias. Neither ever married." And the tale is easily found online: "The handsome Georgian [house] is a replica of the famed Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis, Md. Mathias Hammond built the original in 1774 for his fiancée, but after he became so obsessed with construction, she broke the engagement. Hammond remained a bachelor...".

None of these accounts, or any of the others that relate this story, name the elusive fiancée nor did an exhaustive search of period documents turn up any evidence of her existence or any contemporary account of the broken engagement. Nor did it produce any evidence that Hammond had ever lived in the home he built. Suffering defeat by more conservative elements of the revolutionary movement, he apparently retired to his rural estate for the remainder of his life.

What is interesting is to try to figure out how the story originated. Hammond had a kinsman with the same name, Dr. Mathias Hammond. Possibly it was Dr. Hammond whose fiancée broke their engagement, but over time the two biographies became conflated so that by the late twentieth century local lore attributed the broken engagement to Annapolis's Mathias Hammond. Just as likely, however,

it may have been a creative attempt to explain why Mathias Hammond built one of the city's most impressive homes and then never lived in it.

- ***What's the Real Story about Closets and Taxes?***

Visit all-too-many historic house museums that interpret the colonial period, and you'll be told that houses didn't have closets at that time because closets were taxed. There may be some place along the Atlantic seaboard or in Europe where that statement is true, but it's *not* Maryland or Virginia.

Colonists in the Chesapeake paid a poll tax, a levy determined by the number of taxable individuals in a household and paid by the head of the household. Essentially, the poll tax was a tax on labor and was a progressive tax in that households commanding more labor resources paid higher taxes than households with few workers. In Maryland, legislation defined taxables as all white males sixteen and older and all black males and females sixteen and older. By law, Church of England (Anglican) ministers, persons receiving alms from the county, and slaves judged by the county court to be past labor were exempted from being counted as taxables. Women and clergy members whose households included taxable labor (male children over fifteen, slaves, and/or servants) paid taxes for those individuals but not for themselves.

Each year, by mid-June, the constable made the rounds of his hundred (an administrative unit of the county) to collect the names of the taxables in each household. By August the constables delivered the lists to the county courts. In November, the justices sat as a levy court: they added up the financial obligations of the county for the past twelve months and divided that figure by the total number of taxables to determine the poll tax. Each head of household then paid that amount multiplied by the number of taxables in his household as his county levy, or tax. The same process also determined each household's share of the provincial levy. And each household, regardless of its religious affiliation or lack thereof, paid forty pounds of tobacco per poll to support its Anglican parish church.

County court records contain numerous petitions from individuals asking to have elderly slaves declared levy free (exempt from taxation) or requesting to be made levy free themselves because of age, illness, or disability. No one ever petitioned to be exempt from a tax because of an error in counting the closets in his home.

ABLE-BODIED WORKERS WERE THE ONLY BASIS FOR TAXATION BEFORE THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR.

- ***Did Henry Ford once want to abscond with the Hammond-Harwood House?***

The true story here appears to be 'yes' and 'no.' The correct answer depends on the time period under consideration.

There are two versions of the story of Ford's supposed interest in the house in the 1920s. According to one version, Mrs. Miles White overheard two men talking in a Newburyport antique shop, in the summer of 1926, about Henry Ford's plan to buy the Hammond-Harwood House and move it to Dearborn, Michigan. Mrs. White alerted Dr. James Bordley, a St. John's trustee about Ford's intentions. Bordley went to Dearborn with St. John's President, Enoch Garey, who persuaded Ford to withdraw his offer.

In Dr. Bordley's version, as related in 1955, Bordley and his wife were having lunch at the Wayside Inn in Massachusetts, two days before Hammond-Harwood House was to be sold at auction. Bordley recognized a fellow diner as Henry Ford's agent, and overheard him tell the lunch room operator that he had orders from Ford to buy the house. Bordley left the inn quickly and wired the president of the St. John's board committee that was overseeing the college's interest in acquiring the house. President Garey went to Detroit but found that Henry Ford was out of town. Instead, Garey spoke to the head of the Colonial Dames in Detroit, who put him in touch with Ford's solicitor, who listened to Garey's request and agreed that Ford would not bid on the house.

Minutes of the St. John's Board of Visitors meeting for 23 October 1926 record that Walter Buck, chairman of the acquisition committee, reported that the college bought the Hammond-Harwood House at auction for $47,000. President Garey reported that through the enterprise of Dr. Bordley, he went to Detroit to persuade Ford not to buy the house. Whether Bordley learned of Ford's interest through Mrs. White or by overhearing a conversation at the Wayside Inn, the rest of his account does seem to be accurate. Ford was interested in buying the house but was dissuaded by St. John's President Garey, thus allowing the college to buy the property.

If one shifts focus a decade ahead, however, the answer to the question about Ford's interest then does become "No." In 1935, when indebtedness during the Great Depression compelled St. John's to sell Hammond-Harwood House, a member of the Board of Visitors wrote to Henry Ford to ask if he would be interested in buying the property for $175,000. Ford's secretary replied at that time that Ford would not be interested.