

JOSHUA FRY
by Burke Davis, 1968

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One late July morning (30th) in 1732, having had only two buildings after more than a generation, the College of William and Mary in Virginia began a third, the President's House. The contractor's bricklayers were standing by impatiently, but the president, the Reverend James Blair, made the moment of beginning into a ceremonial occasion. There was no cornerstone, but five academic amateur masons each laid one of the first bricks in the foundation. Blair laid the first brick, followed by the Reverend William Dawson, who was destined to succeed him in office. The third was laid by Joshua Fry, the thirty-two-year-old professor of natural philosophy and mathematics, who was to play a unique role in opening Virginia to the west, in setting the continental course of British America, and in depicting the colony to the world. The "masons" who followed Fry were William Stith, a governor of the college who later wrote a history of Virginia, and one Fox, presumably a member of the faculty.

Fry had come to Virginia from England about ten years earlier; he had been born about 1700, at Crewkerne, in Somerset, and for at least a year had studied at Wadham College, Oxford. Still in his early twenties, he quickly gained prominence in Essex County, Virginia, where university trained men were rare. He became a vestryman and a magistrate and married a wealthy widow, Mary Micou Hill, the daughter of a Huguenot physician. Commissary Blair had called him to Williamsburg as master of the new grammar school, which was to prepare future students for the college. He spent only two years with these young men, for in 1731, a few months before his work on the foundation of the President's House, Fry was promoted to the college faculty.

As a trained mathematician and surveyor, Fry saw the need for an accurate survey of Virginia, which had remained largely uncharted since its beginnings in 1607, except for the coastal map of Captain John Smith, and running a portion of the boundary with North Carolina. In 1737, Fry and two others asked the House of Burgesses to commission a survey of the colony and to publish a map, so complete that it would show "the bays, navigable rivers, with the soundings, counties, parishes, towns and gentlemen's seats, with whatever is useful or remarkable." After a debate that dragged on for five years the Assembly finally rejected the idea. By then Fry had given up and "gone to the back settlements in order

to raise a fortune for his family," and was living not far southeast of the present site of Charlottesville, when Albemarle County was carved out of Goochland County. He immediately became the county's leading citizen, and a member of the House of Burgesses, so that he often returned to Williamsburg. He was also the first presiding justice of the county, commander of the militia, and surveyor. As surveyor, one of his assistants was Peter Jefferson, then in his late thirties and the father of two-year-old Thomas. The two became close friends, and worked together until Fry's death.

Peter Jefferson was a legendary strong man, one of many Virginia frontiersmen of whom it was said that he could stand between two hogsheads of tobacco as they lay on their sides and raise each upright. He and Fry, at any rate, led the Albemarle militia and worked together on surveys of tracts, of which Fry made scores in the next few years, helping to bring order to land records of the region.

The imperial domain of the Fairfax family, including the whole of Virginia's Northern Neck, had never been surveyed along its western border, between the Potomac and the headwaters of the

Rappahannock, though William Byrd II and a party had made a beginning east of the Blue Ridge thirteen years before. In 1746, by orders of the Council, this western line was surveyed. Colonel Joshua Fry was one of the commissioners and as a surveyor he chose Peter Jefferson; they set off in a party of forty men in September on a harrowing adventure of exploration. For seven weeks men and horses struggled up and down the Alleghenies, threading swamps choked with laurel and rhododendron, clambering up slopes where horses had to be led and pushed, sometimes running out of food, and often losing sight of the sun and sky. Several horses were killed, and those that survived came back as walking skeletons. Two of the worst spots on the journey were named Purgatory and the Styx, the latter "enough to strike terror into any human creature." At last, when they had returned to their starting place by the Fairfax Stone of the boundary, Jefferson carved his initials, "PJ," on a ridge atop the Alleghenies.

Three years later, in 1749, Fry and Jefferson were hired by Virginia to complete the boundary line between North Carolina and Virginia, which Colonel Byrd's party had run 237 miles inland from the sea to Peters Creek, in Patrick County, Virginia. Fry and Jefferson never found the end of this old line, but reckoned their position by the stars. This expedition was as full of hardship as the Fairfax survey, according to Jefferson family tradition; the men were attacked by wild animals by day and forced to sleep in trees at night. Several of the party fainted from hunger and fell out of the march, but Jefferson (and apparently Fry) ate raw meat and "did not once flag," until the line had been run westward as far as Steep Rock Creek. They had gone ninety miles over rough mountain country, including a crossing of New River. When their report and a map of the area reached Williamsburg, the Council paid Fry and Jefferson 300 pounds each, beyond expenses, a handsome fee, whatever their privations.

Thus this surveying team was well known in Williamsburg when a vigorous new president of the Board of Trade and Plantations, the Earl of Halifax, took office in London. Halifax pressed immediately for a clearer picture of the bounds of Virginia. He ordered an accurate map, for vital reasons: he wanted information on "English settlements.....and of Encroachments, if any have been made by the Subjects of any foreign Prince on this Colony." Acting Governor Lewis Burwell knew just the men for the job, and commissioned Fry and Jefferson as "the most able persons." Fry, as the senior partner, had apparently found Peter an apt pupil during their years of work together. As Peter's son Thomas wrote, "My father's education had been quite neglected, but....eager after information, he read much and improved himself."

The remarkable map produced by Fry and Jefferson on the basis of their years of surveying in the west was presented to the Council late in 1751, and the cartographers were paid 150 pounds each. Burwell

was so delighted, especially with Fry, that he sent it off to the Board of Trade saying, "considering that we are yet a Country of woods, it is Surprising how he could draw so beautiful a map of it." The Earl of Halifax had it printed in London, probably in the spring of 1752, as "A Map of The Inhabited Part of Virginia." The first edition of this famous map is exceedingly rare; the two known copies are in the Tracy W. McGregor Library of the University of Virginia and the New York Public Library. Several later versions exist, and the Fry-Jefferson map was the basis for the Virginia region in the later John Mitchell map of America, said to be the greatest example of American cartography.

The map was the greatest contribution from Fry or Jefferson, excluding the famous son of the latter. It stood for many years as the most valuable map of Virginia, and was the ancestor of many others. New material in the map chiefly concerned southwest Virginia, a territory previously unknown in detail; and Fry's observations sketched the beginnings of the westward movement across the Alleghenies. Fry's lengthy report, attached to the map, reviewed Virginia history from the Jamestown settlement and

included material from several histories, among them that of his fellow brick mason of the President's House, William Stith, and lore of western Indian tribes, as well as a report on the territory of New France.

In the year of the map's publication Fry was chosen, with Lunsford Lomax and James Patton, to make a treaty with the Six Nations, as well as the Shawnee, Mingo, and Delaware tribes, in an effort to open up the Ohio country. They met the Indians near the forks of the Ohio River. Frenchmen had been there before them, but, after many days of bargaining, Fry and his companions persuaded the chiefs to sign the treaty of Logstown (or Lancaster), which permitted the English to build two forts on the Ohio and to settle southeast of that river. As a result of this treaty the warriors of the Six Nations, an important force, sided with the English during the French and Indian War. The short-lived peace on the Ohio was shattered in 1753 by a French invasion. Determined to drive out the French, Virginia, now governed by Robert Dinwiddie, once more turned to Colonel Fry. In May, 1754, Fry got a commission from the governor: "You are by me appointed Commander in Chief on the expedition," the purpose of which was to complete an outpost on the Monongahela and Ohio.

Troops from Georgia, South Carolina, New York, and North Carolina accompanied the 300-man Virginia regiment, making about eleven hundred in all. Since some of the troops were commanded by British officers, Fry was warned to "show due regard" for their authority. The advance party was led by Fry's assistant, Lieutenant Colonel George Washington, who was irritated by the colonel's tardiness. Delayed by dilatory contractors, reluctant volunteers, deserting Indian allies, and lack of transport, Fry was long in Alexandria. Washington wrote him from his wilderness camp: "If there does not come a sufficient reinforcement, we must either quit our ground and retreat to you, or fight very unequal numbers which I will do before I will give up one inch of what we have gained." Washington soon fought a skirmish, defeating a party of Indians under a French officer, Joseph Coulon, the Sieur de Jumonville, for which Governor Dinwiddie sent out medals from Williamsburg to Washington, Fry, and the Indian leader, Half King. There was little else to celebrate from the expedition.

Fry and his party at last reached Fort Cumberland, the present site of Cumberland, Maryland, with an absurdly small provision train of five rickety wagons and a cart. It was near there, at Wills Creek, that Fry died, badly injured by a fall from his horse. He was buried 31 May 1754. He was probably attended by the only doctor in his regiment, Dr. James Craik, who was to become Washington's physician and medical officer of the armies of the Revolution. One historian (Slaughter) found a manuscript in the Fry family papers describing the burial, attended by Washington and the little army; Washington is said to have carved an inscription on a large tree over the grave: "Under this oak lies the body of the Good, The Just and the Noble Fry." Command of the expedition fell to the twenty-two-year-old Washington, who led the troops westward, met the French and Indians, and was driven off in defeat. It was a failure that prompted the British Parliament to a major effort to rid the continent of the French, and led to the shipping of Braddock's troops to America a few months later.

Back in Albemarle County, Fry's successor was Peter Jefferson, who inherited from him the posts of member of the House of Burgesses, commander of the militia, and county surveyor. Peter himself died three years later, passing on his surveying tools, half a dozen maps, and books, as well as land and slaves, to his son Thomas, then fourteen. Among the maps was probably a copy of the Fry-Jefferson map, which is known as "the best one that anybody made of Virginia in the eighteenth century." Within ten years after the old Williamsburg schoolmaster Fry went to his grave in the Maryland hills, the continent had been made safe for British rule and the Virginia he had mapped was secure. Within another generation, the son of his companion of wilderness surveys had played a major role in changing

American destinies once more. Fry has not been celebrated by historians; as one early chronicler (Slaughter) of his life wrote; "I know of no other person in our history of like social position, wealth, capacity, character and public services . . . about whom there is so little to be found in print, and that little so scattered."

Burke Davis cites as especially good references: Virginia Gazettes of various 18th century publishers; manuscript and other collections of Swem Library of William and Mary College at Williamsburg; Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia, 6 v., Richmond; Legislative Journals of the Council of the Colony of Virginia, 3v, Richmond; Journals, House of Burgesses of Virginia, 13 v. Richmond; Research Department of Colonial Williamsburg; Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie, 2v., Richmond; Memoirs of Colonel Joshua Fry by Philip Slaughter, 1880, Richmond.

- Aubin Clarkson Hutchison, 1999.

Burke Davis (1913 – 2006) was a journalist, novelist, and nonfiction writer, best known for popular war histories. A native of North Carolina, he lived for about thirty years in Virginia, and many of his histories and biographies tackled Virginia subjects, such as Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, George Washington, and Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller. He was awarded the Mayflower Cup in 1959 for his history To Appomattox: Nine April Days, 1865, and the North Carolina Award for Literature in 1973. [source] Encyclopedia of Virginia; contributed by Bland Whitley.

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