GEORGE DAME

of Middlesex County, Virginia

*A Short Biography of My Patriot Ancestor*

“These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot may, in this crisis, shirk from service of his country . . . [but shrink he must not if these states to withstand the tyranny of Great Britain].” ~ paraphrased from Thomas Paine, *The Crisis* (1776)

By law, every able-bodied man was a member of his local militia, to be called upon in times of national emergency, much like today’s National Guard. Militiamen could be called for three-month tours of duty, serving in Virginia and sometimes in the Carolinas. Many served more than one tour of duty. However, harvest time recalled many of them back home because these men were planters and working farmers.

My patriot ancestor, a Virginia planter named George Dame, answered that call relatively late in the American War for Independence. My great-great-great grandfather was no soldier, summer or otherwise. He was a man of peace, a farmer, a vestryman at his Anglican church at Urbana in the Virginia Tidewater area. Yet, as an excellent rifleman, he answered the call to muster for duty in the Virginia state militia.

As a prominent tobacco planter, George Dame owned several large tracts of land, each tract comprising anywhere from a few up to a hundred acres. Originally, “plantation” referred simply to a settlement, later becoming organized agricultural plantations of tobacco, rice, cotton as cash crops. Most of these estates now exist only in court documents, census records deeds of sale, old family records.

Family records indicate that my ancestor sold off lands, only to turn around and buy up more land. Why? Tobacco depletes the soil. One must move on or else plant something else, as George Washington switched from tobacco to wheat at Mount Vernon.

Urbana, my ancestor’s home, was one of 20 fifty-acre towns created by an act passed by the House of Burgesses in 1680 to encourage establishment of port towns open for trade – especially the tobacco industry. In 1706, Urbana was officially named in honor of England’s Queen Anne – “City of Anne.”

Then along came the War. Under British occupation, the plantations and their neighboring port towns suffered raids, destruction of homes, warehouses, private property, military supplies. This had been a thriving area of commercial activity as planters brought their hogsheads of tobacco to warehouses and wharves on the riverbanks and shipment abroad by merchant ships plying the Tidewater estuaries – attractive targets of British sabotage crippling the Virginia economy. The American Revolution had become a “home front” war.

According to family lore, my ancestor served under General Lafayette at the siege of Yorktown, a well-known port town just up the road from Urbana. Cornwallis’s surrender was virtuously the end of the war. There remained only New York to contend with. General Howe had no choice but to capitulate. In fact, I think Howe had already sailed back home to Britain and hailed as a “war hero.” General George Washington, however, was the true war hero.