

Patriot Profile: Colonel Nicholas Lewis (1734-1808)

Patriot, Military Leader, and Member of Virginia's Committee of Safety

Colonel Nicholas Lewis was born January 19, 1734, at "Belvoir" in Louisa County, Virginia, the second son of Colonel Robert Lewis and Jane Meriwether. Through both his Lewis and Meriwether families, Nicholas was part of two prominent Virginia families whose members played significant roles in the history of the Commonwealth and the American Revolution.

In 1735, Nicholas's maternal grandfather, Nicholas Meriwether, received land grants from King George III totaling approximately 19,000 acres in Albemarle County, near present-day Charlottesville. One tract of about 1,020 acres was located west of the Rivanna River in what is now the Locust Grove and Belmont areas. Known simply as "The Farm," the property was one of the few cleared areas in what was otherwise largely unsettled forest.

The original residence at The Farm stood on a hill overlooking the Rivanna River. After the first house was destroyed by fire, Nicholas Lewis inherited the property in 1762 and constructed a new residence around 1770. Contemporary descriptions portray an elegant estate surrounded by gardens, ornamental shrubs, and fruit trees. Records from the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia in 1805 describe the house as a two-story wooden structure approximately 48 feet long and 22 feet wide.

Built with pit-sawn timber and traditional mortise-and-tenon construction, the Lewis residence would later become associated with several notable figures of the Revolutionary era.

A Revolutionary War Connection

During the Revolutionary War, British Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton used the Lewis home as his headquarters when he entered Charlottesville in 1781 in an unsuccessful effort to capture Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson escaped, but Tarleton captured Daniel Boone, who was then serving as a member of the Virginia legislature, and briefly held him at the Lewis residence.

Thomas Jefferson was himself a frequent visitor to The Farm. He passed through the property while traveling to Charlottesville, where he was overseeing

construction of what would eventually become the University of Virginia. A natural spring south of the house provided the estate with a dependable source of water.

The original Lewis residence no longer survives. In 1825, Charlottesville attorney and future University of Virginia law professor John A. G. Davis acquired part of the original property and commissioned a new residence designed and constructed by builders associated with Thomas Jefferson. That house is considered an outstanding surviving example of Jeffersonian residential architecture. During the Civil War, Major General George A. Custer briefly used it as his headquarters in March 1865.

Today, the only surviving structure associated with Nicholas Lewis's original "The Farm" is believed to be the former kitchen, or cook's house. It remains in a residential neighborhood along Twelfth Street, surrounded by mature hardwood trees and retaining a distant view of Monticello.

Mary "Capt. Molly" Walker

In 1758, Nicholas Lewis married Mary "Capt. Molly" Walker, who was born in 1742 at Castle Hill. She was the daughter of Dr. Thomas Walker and Mildred Thornton Meriwether.

Through this marriage, Lewis was connected to another prominent Virginia family. Mary's father, Dr. Thomas Walker, was a noted physician, explorer, and landowner who played an important role in the early development of western Virginia and Kentucky.

Serving Virginia's Revolutionary Government

Lewis's most significant contribution to the Revolutionary cause came in 1775.

In July of that year, Virginia's royal governor, Lord Dunmore, fled the colony, leaving Virginia without an effective executive government. The colonial assembly reorganized itself as a Provincial Convention and created the Committee of Safety to administer the affairs of the colony. Colonel Nicholas Lewis was appointed as one of its eleven members.

The Committee of Safety functioned as Virginia's temporary revolutionary government. Its responsibilities included enforcing the decisions of the Provincial Convention, organizing and supplying Virginia's military forces, appointing officers, and managing public funds needed for the war effort.

The committee also exercised considerable authority. It effectively served as commander of Virginia's military forces, supervised military courts, and possessed the power to detain or punish individuals suspected of

supporting the British. Even a death sentence imposed by a court-martial required the committee's approval before it could be carried out.

Although Virginia did not face the same level of military crisis experienced by some other colonies, the Committee of Safety played an important role in preparing the Commonwealth for war. Much of its work involved raising and equipping militia units, supplying troops, and responding to British activity, particularly the raids conducted by Lord Dunmore.

One of the committee's more controversial decisions came in 1776, when it ordered residents of Princess Anne and Norfolk Counties to move inland. The measure was intended to prevent Loyalists from assisting British forces operating along the Virginia coast. The policy caused considerable hardship, including the loss of property and disruption of families. Following protests and further consideration, the order was modified and eventually repealed for most residents, although known Loyalists continued to face restrictions.

The Committee of Safety remained in existence until Virginia adopted its new constitution in 1776 and established a permanent government with an elected governor and council.

Military Service on the Frontier

Colonel Nicholas Lewis also served Virginia as a militia commander. Although surviving records provide relatively few details of his military career, he is identified as commanding a militia regiment during the 1776 campaign against the Cherokee.

During the Revolutionary War, some Cherokee groups, encouraged by British agents, attacked frontier settlements in Virginia and neighboring colonies. Virginia responded by mobilizing a large militia force. The campaign resulted in the destruction of Cherokee towns, crops, and supplies and ultimately contributed to peace agreements reached in 1777. Under those agreements, the Cherokee ceded extensive areas of territory.

Lewis's service demonstrated the dual responsibilities faced by Virginia's patriot leaders: defending the revolutionary cause while also protecting frontier communities from attack.

The Respect of Thomas Jefferson

Nicholas Lewis was remembered not only for his military and public service but also for his personal character.

In a later account, Thomas Jefferson praised Lewis as a brave, fair, and highly respected man. Jefferson noted

that Lewis was frequently called upon to settle disputes within his community, a reflection of the confidence his neighbors placed in his judgment.

Jefferson also pointed to Lewis's role as guardian of Meriwether Lewis following the death of the young man's father. Meriwether Lewis would later gain lasting fame as the co-leader, with William Clark, of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-1806.

Legacy of a Virginia Patriot

Colonel Nicholas Lewis died December 8, 1808, at the age of 74. He was buried on his property in a cemetery on a hill overlooking the Rivanna River. His wife, Mary, survived him and died February 9, 1824, at the age of 81.



Nicholas Lewis's life spanned the transformation of Virginia from a British colony into an independent Commonwealth. As a member of Virginia's Committee of Safety, a militia commander, landowner, community leader, and trusted member of a prominent Virginia family, he contributed to the Revolutionary cause both on the battlefield and through civil service.

His story is a reminder that the American Revolution depended not only upon the better-known generals and statesmen, but also upon local leaders and patriots who accepted the responsibility of governing, defending, and sustaining their communities during the struggle for independence.