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# William and Mary

## College Quarterly



## Historical • Magazine.

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## CHANCELLOR WYTHE AND PARSON WEEMS

Contributed by D. R. ANDERSON, Ph. D., Professor of History  
and Political Science, Richmond College,  
Richmond, Virginia.

The article below was discovered by the writer after considerable search. He had found out that Parson Weems wrote a character sketch of Chancellor Wythe, and, realizing how interesting such an effusion would be, kept on the hunt for it, until it was located in the *Times* of Charleston, S. C., for July 1, 1806. The "find" is of great interest to the writer, both for what it says about Wythe on whose life an effort is being made to collect material, and for the Weemesque way in which it is said. It should be of interest, also, to students both of Wythe and of Weems.

Of these two famous Virginians it is feared that Weems has a far wider popular reputation—though of a very different kind—than Wythe. Everybody has heard of the eccentric parson who gave us the "cherry tree" and other remarkable stories about Washington. Weems, however, was the author of a surprising number of books and pamphlets in addition to the "Life of Washington." Among them are lives of General Francis Marion, Benjamin Franklin, William Penn, and such marvellous titles as the following: "The Bad Wife's Looking Glass, or God's Revenge Against Cruelty to Husbands Exemplified in the Awful History of the Beautiful but Depraved Mrs. Rebecca Cotton, who Most Inhumanly Murdered her Husband, John Cotton, Esq., for which Horrid Act God permitted her in the Prime of Life and Bloom of Beauty to be cut off by Her Brother, Stephen Kannady, May 5, 1807, with a Number of Incidents and Anecdotes Most Extraordinary and Instructive."

In all his writings it was Weems' aim to collect a "Number of Incidents and Anecdotes Most Extraordinary and Instructive" and to use them for moral teaching. The prevalent opinion of the "Parson" is that expressed by Bishop Meade when he said [Old

Churches, II, 234] "If some may, by comparison be called 'nature's noblemen,' he [Weems] might surely have been pronounced one of 'nature's oddities.'" However, the more recent tendency is toward a more charitable opinion of the anecdotal "Parson." Hayden, in *Virginia Genealogies* [p. 350] says of the famous stories in the "Life of Washington:" "Whatever may have been the character of Weems, his pretty and natural anecdotes of the boyhood of Washington are much more easily *ridiculed* than *disproved*." A fair judgment is that of his biographer in "Library of Southern Literature," XIII, 5737: "He saw the facts through the medium of his glowing imagination and moral enthusiasm; but it is simply misconceiving the whole man to say that his stories are the deliberate invention of falsehood."

Weems travelled for his publisher, Mathew Carey, of Philadelphia, from Pennsylvania to Georgia, and in the article printed here we find him on one of his visits to Charleston, S. C., selling "elegant red morocco Family Bibles," and the like. A recent biography of Weems by L. C. Wroth appeared in 1911 under the title, "Parson Weems: a biographical and critical study."

The stories told by Weems about Wythe are true to life, however fictitious the particular incidents might be. Wythe was both religious and honest—two qualities not infrequently associated. For Wythe's religion, see a very interesting manuscript preserved in the Virginia Historical Society; and published in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, VI, 102. Wythe was far from orthodox, as were most of the great men of his day, but he prayed "unceasingly," had an "unfaltering trust," and lived a spotless life—orthodoxy enough for most of us. As a lawyer, his chief quality, in addition to supreme ability, was honesty. He rejected bad causes, charged small fees, and gave large services. He was the first professor of law in America, and the teacher of many of the leading statesmen of his day, including such opposites as his life-long friends, Thomas Jefferson and John Marshall. For a good account of Wythe see, *The Great American Lawyer Series*, Vol. I, where President Tyler displays his usual learning and literary skill.

Reverend Lee Massey, mentioned in Weems' letter, was rector of Truro Parish while Washington was a vestryman. He was a

friend of Washington, and legal adviser of George Mason. "He tried to follow in the lead of Chancellor Wythe, to examine cases placed in his care and to accept the good and reject the bad. It proved a failure, and he withdrew from practice . . . He often said Mr. Wythe was the only 'honest lawyer he ever knew'" [Meade II, 238, quoting Colonel Stoddert of Wycomico House, Maryland, grandson of Massey].

Robert Alexander, to whom the Wythe letter given by Weems, is addressed, presumably is the Robert Alexander mentioned in WILLIAM AND MARY QUARTERLY, IX, 253, whose will was dated 1788, and proved on February 18, 1793. Alexander, Weems, Massey were all of Prince William and Fairfax, neighboring counties. Alexander married Mariamne Stoddert, Weems married Fanny Ewell, sister of Dr. Thomas Ewell, who married Elizabeth Stoddert; Massey was the ex-lawyer rector of Truro Parish in Fairfax County, and Wythe was the religious, learned, honest, original, and universally beloved lawyer, professor, statesman, and chancellor. The association of these names in Weems' characteristic repast of rhetoric and all-but-impossible anecdote is of more than general interest.

D. R. ANDERSON.

THE TIMES, CHARLESTON, S. C.

TUESDAY EVENING, JULY 1, 1806.

*For The Times*

THE HONEST LAWYER

AN ANECDOTE

Glancing an eye over one of your late papers, I accidentally caught the paragraph which stated the *death* of George Wythe, Esq., Chancellor of Virginia. Some of your correspondents, very young and *tender-hearted*, perhaps, appeared quite galvanized by this piece of intelligence—but for my own part, getting now to be a little oldish myself, and daily, as becomes a stranger in Charleston, at this season, looking out for a squall of the same sort, I cannot say it was a matter of much shock to me. I knew this much of Citizen Wythe, that *great* and *good* as he was, he was still no more than mortal man; and I also know that he was arrived to that *full ripe* state, at which philosophers and fruits begin, alike, to tremble to

their fall; and when death, by a touch of his old thresher, with equal ease, brings down a chancellor or a cherry—and still less, if possible, was I *grieved* at his exit. What! *grieved* that this veteran of the law, after a life of glorious toil, to revive the *golden age* of justice on earth, was *returned* to the high courts of heaven—not, *pale* and *trembling*, like the wretched Jeffries, wet with widow's tears and blood of murdered patriots, to meet the tear-avenging God; but, *bright in conscios integrity*, with hands pure as the sweet palms which press the alabaster bottles of life, and in robes of innocence snow-white as those that angels wear, to meet the smiles of the *Judge Supreme*, and the acclamations of brother saints innumerable. Shall I grieve at this? At this, the loveliest sight ever yet placed before the eyes of sweetly sympathizing charity? Oh no. When a *PLEADER*, like him, forsakes this toilsome clod, to return to his *native skies*, let not the voice of grief be heard. Let us rather follow the steps of his departure with joy-gazing eyes, and *shouts of praise* to God, for a brother, who, after a life so honorable to human nature, and so instructive to the world, is going to his *reward*. And for the white stone that guards his dust, 'tis wisdom's *beacon* to the young: Let it shine with the oil of gladness, suffer it not to be dimm'd with unseemly *tears*. No; give them to the *vile attorney*, who, for a fee, supported the villain's claims, and tore from the little weeping orphan, his cake and homely robe—give them to the *infatuated miser*, who, darkened at sight of a creditor, cursed his own signature if it compelled the payment of a dollar—and, unmoved by the calls of honor, still hugged to himself his precious pelf, content to live a scoundrel, provided he might but die rich—"guilt's blunder and the loudest laugh of hell." Give to such as *these*, your tears; they need them—but pour them not over the tomb of the sleeping Wythe, who while living, shewed how angels live. Having been often told, that though the *honestest* man in Virginia, yet he Wythe was not the most orthodox, I felt an ardent wish for an opportunity to learn his real sentiments about religion. That opportunity was soon offered. I fell in with him at Richmond—he invited me to dine with him. Being altogether granivorous himself, he gave me a dinner exactly to his own tooth; *rice* milk, improved with plumbs, sugar and nutmeg! Choice fare for a Bramin, or an Old Bachelor. It was over this demulcent diet, that I let drop expressions which shewed the current of my wishes; he took the hint, and with looks of complacency, and accents sweet as those of his native Mocking-Bird, he thus unbosomed himself:—

"Why, sir, as to religion, I have ever considered it as our *best* and *greatest* friend. Those glorious views which it gives to our relation to God, and of our destination to heaven, on the easy terms of a *good life*, unquestionably furnish the best of all motives to virtue; the strongest dissuasives from vice; and the richest cordial under trouble. Thus far, I suppose, we are *all* agreed; but not, perhaps, so entirely in another opinion, which is, that in the sight of God, *moral character* is the main

point. This opinion, very clearly taught by *Reason*, is fully confirmed by *Revelation*, which every where teaches '*That the tree will be valued only for its good fruit,*' and, that in the *last day*, according to our works of *love*, or of *hatred*, of *mercy*, or of *cruelty*, we shall sing with *angels*, or weep with *devils*. In short, the Christian Religion (the *sweetest* and *sublimest* in the world) labours, through-out, to infix in our hearts this great truth, that God is love—and that in exact proportion as consequently shall partake of his friendship and felicity forever. While others, therefore, have been beating their heads, or embittering their hearts, with disputes about '*forms of baptism,*' and '*modes of faith,*' it has always, thank God, struck me, as *my great duty*, constantly to think of this—*God is love; and he that walketh in love, walketh in God and God in him.*"

This was the creed of Chancellor Wythe, the Hale, the Moore, of Virginia. His life was correspondingly amiable. His salary, as Chancellor of the State, was 350£ Sterling, per annum!—not a tythe the cost of a diamond necklace for the favorite Miss of an European Nabob—indeed, hardly a month's allowance for one of their dog kennels! But to our honest Chancellor, it was enough, and to spare:— So cordially did he abhor the idea of giving to any man the pain of deception and disappointment, that he lived nobly independent with his little revenue, and no creditor ever went sad or angry from his door. With a fair claim on him, you might approach his simple dwelling with as light a heart as if you were skipping into the State Bank, with a check in your hand from John Blake, Esq. Exhibit your demands against him never so early, yet you never discomposed him—his eye lost none of its friendly lustre—his fine open brow contracted no cloud—no feature frowned the hateful Basilisk to kill the *hope* or to mar the *pleasure* of receiving your money. He never discharged a debt with those distressing sighs which often make a generous creditor wish he could afford *to give it up*; nor with that peevishness and passion which too plainly tell you, that he had rather *you were at the devil*.—

His *philanthropy* gave him that tender interest in your welfare, that "*to owe you nothing but love,*" was to him, in lieu of a harsh precept, an *heartfelt pleasure*, and scarcely so much his *duty* as his *delight*.

The effect of this on the harmony and happiness of society, is incalculable. "Some men," says Lord Chesterfield, "oblige us more in *denying*, than others in *doing*, us a favor"—owing to the sweet spirit accompanying the denial. Now if there be such a *charm* in this spirit (which is no other than that of *love*), that *with* it a denial obliges us more than a denotation *without* it, then how delicious to the heart must the obligation be, when accompanied with that inexpressible charm of *look*, *voice* and *manner*, which converts *denial* into *obligation*? Here lay the fort of this eminent Barrister, from whose fair example even pulpits might gain instruction. He always received his creditors with a countenance so *refreshing*—attended to his claim with such respectful *readiness*—and discharged it with

a promptitude and pleasure so *endearing*—that his *creditor* actually felt himself, in turn, a *debtor* to the good Chancellor, whom he never left but with a throb of grateful sentiment, spontaneously breathing out his warmest benedictions on his head, and in as fervent prayers, that all men would, but like him, “*live together in love, as dear children*”; daily exalting *each other's esteem*, by *duties, honorably performed*; daily *sweetening each other's spirits*, by good *office, cheerfully rendered*—that thus, ever filling each others hearts with love, they may strew over with flowers *this life's* paths, and substantially support each others steps to a *better*; where the recollection of such essential services past, will serve to give a brighter lustre to their love-beaming eyes, and to exalt to higher enjoyment their blissful communion forever.

In support of this little moral eulogy of Chancellor Wythe—in proof, I mean, that he possessed that *fervent love*, which gave him so tender an interest in the comfort of another, that no money could ever tempt him to invade it; take the following anecdote of him, and most exactly (in substance at least) as I received it from the Rev. Mr. Lee Massey, a first-rate Virginia clergyman, and from early life, the intimate of Mr. Wythe.

“In the month of June, many years ago, I went,” said Mr. Massey, “to dine with my friend, Bob Alexander.” (Now, it may not much confuse the reader, to tell him that this same *Bob* Alexander, as Mr. Massey, in his familiar way, always called him, was a wealthy and worthy gentleman, living on the Potomac, and near Alexandria). Well, “while Mrs. Alexander, like Milton's Eve, ‘on hospitable thoughts intent,’ was preparing an elegant dinner, Bob and I took our chairs into the piazza, which commanded a very fine prospect indeed—full in our view lay the great Potomac, the mile-wide boundary between the sister states of Maryland and Virginia—on the Virginia side the rich bottoms lengthened out, far as the eye could see, were covered with crops of full ripe wheat, whose yellow tops rolling in ridges before the playful breeze, reflected the beams of the sun in sudden gleams of gold, brightening the day—on the Maryland side, a stately ridge of hills, high crowned with trees, formed as it were, a frowning guard to the great river, and threw its subliming shades, a striking contrast to the milder beauties of the opposite shore. Out spread between the two, lay the Potomac, whose little waves, just waked up by the young winds of summer, ran chasing each other along their sky-blue fields, often speaking their joy in bursts of snowy laughter. While thus we sat feasting on these richly varied and magnificent scenes, which the great Maker had so kindly spread before us, Bob's servant arrived from town with the newspapers, and a letter, which he handed to his master. Having hastily run it over, he exclaimed with great earnestness, Well, really Parson, this is strange, very strange! Why that George Wythe must certainly be either an angel or a fool.”—‘Not a fool, Bob,’ said I; ‘George Wythe is no fool.’—‘Well, that was never my opinion, neither, Parson; but what the plague are we to make of this confounded letter here—

Suppose, Parson, you read it, and give me your opinion on it.' I took it, and with great pleasure read nearly word for word, as follows:—

Robert Alexander, Esq.

Sir.—The suit wherein you were pleased to do me the honor to engage my services, was last week brought to trial, and has fully satisfied me that you were entirely in the wrong. Knowing you to be a perfectly honest man, I concluded that you have some how or other been misled. At any rate I find that I have been altogether misled in the affair, and therefore insist on washing my hands of it immediately. In so doing I trust I shall not be charged with any failure of duty to you. As your lawyer 'tis true I owe you everything—everything *consistent with justice*—against her, *nothing*; nor can ever owe. For justice is appointed of God, the golden rule of all order throughout the universe, and therefore, as involving the greatest of all *possible good* to his creatures, it must be of all things the dearest to HIMSELF. He therefore, who knowingly acts against justice, is a rebel against God and a premeditated murderer of mankind. Of this crime (which worlds could not tempt me to commit) I should certainly be guilty, were I, under my present convictions, to go on with your suit. I hasten therefore to enclose you the fifty dollar note you gave me as a fee, and with it my advice, that you compromise the matter on the best terms you can.

I have just to add, that as conscience will not allow me to say anything *for you*, honor forbids that I should say anything *against you*. But, by all means, compromise, and save the costs. Adieu—wishing you that *inward sunshine*, which nothing outward can darken.

I remain, dear sir, your's

Geo. Wythe.

For the sake of those who may wish to know whether the advice, in this extraordinary letter, was followed or not, I beg leave to add, that it was not followed. Mr. Massey told me, that his friend Bob was resolved, *noluit voluit*, to go on with the suit, and therefore gave the fifty dollar note to some other gentleman of the law, who pushed the matter for him, and exactly with success predicted by the good Mr. Wythe—*the loss of his land, with all costs!* "Blessed are the *meeek*, for they shall inherit the earth."

M. L. Weems.

M. L. W. congratulates his Charleston friends, subscribers to WASHINGTON, for the *immortal honour* done, as well to their own morals as to the memory of that Hero.—Of 350 subscribers, there remain scarcely a dozen without their books, and of *these*, the *universally fair character*, gives full assurance that he is not to lament their lack of humanity to him, or of gratitude to Washington. It may not injure flavour of the *sparkling*

*Pintard*, to say on the glorious 4th "I owe nothing now but *Love* to the memory of him HIM [*sic*] who like the flaming Cherubim (by the tree of life) stood firm, where millions where [were] firm by that blessed tree of Political life, planted 30 years ago by our Father."

M. L. W. is still with his friend Dr. Moses—has still a few elegant red morocco Family Bibles, with Cuts; Hymen's Recruiting Sergeant for the Poor Bachelors; the great Algernon Sidney for Politicians; and Montague on the Fates and Fortunes of all the ancient Republics, a very interesting and valuable book, just reprinted and beautifully bound, price One Dollar.