

George Blagden

(- 3 Jun 1826)

The National Intelligencer, June 5, 1826

An afflicting dispensation has deprived the community of Washington of one of its oldest and most respectable inhabitants. A fatal accident has robbed his family and friends of the life and example of that estimable and useful citizen, George Blagden. About 6 o'clock on Saturday evening (3rd), he was



standing beneath a bank of earth some six feet high, at the south West corner of the Capitol, inspecting a part of the old foundation which the digging had uncovered, when the bank caved in as he was going from it, and fell upon him, he falling on his face before it. His head was not covered, and he was soon dug out, and carried home, apparently not severely hurt, sensible, and directing himself how he should be placed. After arriving at his house, half a mile from the scene of the disaster, he was able to sit up in his bed and assist those about him in changing his clothing, but, in one short hour he was a corpse!

Thus has terminated the life of one of the best of citizens, parents, and friends. He was a native of Attercliffe, Yorkshire, in England, but was one of the first settlers in Washington, having been here from the laying of its foundation stone. At the time of his death, and for many years previous, he was Superintendent of the masons employed on the Capitol, an Alderman of the City, and a Director of the Bank of Washington. In every relation he ever held to society, and particularly in his religious connection (as the founder of Rev. Mr. Post's church) he was esteemed and respected. The whole city mourns his sudden death.

I.T. Friary, "They Built the Capitol," Garrett & Massie, Richmond, 1940, pp. 161-162

One of the few men who saw long service on the Capitol, and kept out of politics and the jealousies

that involved so many, was George Blagden. Like Hoban, he worked on friendly terms with all the warring factions of architects and commissioners from 1794, shortly after his arrival in this country, until 1826. On June 3rd of that year he, as did Lentahl, met his death by accident when a bank of earth at the south angle of the Capitol caved in upon him.

Blagden held the position of superintendent of stonework and quarrying. He was a skilled mechanic, with an old world training, and possessed the confidence of all the officials with whom he was associated, his advice being sought on many occasions. During his long stay in Washington he managed to accumulate a comfortable fortune.

The Evening Star, Sunday, May 27, 1917

Rambler Writes of Life and Work of George Blagden

A man cannot dip into the early records of Washington without frequently coming upon the name of George Blagden, and the Rambler means to tell some of the facts relating to this man which have come to his notice. The record will be far from complete, but without doubt many of the links in the record which the Rambler has not found will be supplied in time. Last winter in writing of some of the old Barry homes on southeast New Jersey avenue, near the Easter branch, the Rambler said:

If you will stop at the crossing of K street and New Jersey avenue south you will see a whitewashed high board fence on the east, and within are a number of sheds, stables and a low brick building. Through a gateway in that fence wagons with detachable iron bodies come and go with a jar and rattle familiar to the people of the city. They are the garbage wagons and that is their home. In 1844 some of the lots in the square between New Jersey avenue, 3d street and K and L streets southeast were owned by Thomas Law's heirs, Richard Barry, S.B. Beach, William M. Ellis, J.C. Fitzpatrick and Thomas Blagden, who at that time lived in the square bounded by New Jersey avenue, 2d, I and K streets southeast, the square on which now stand the sheds and low brick building, surrounded by the whitewashed high board fence.

The earliest directory of Washington was that published by Judah Delano in 1822 and which was printed by William Duncan, who had a printing shop on 12th street between E and F streets northwest, though Delano himself also conducted a printing shop on the south side of F street, the second door west of 6th street northwest. In that directory is this: "George Blagden, chief stone cutter at the Capitol; dwelling, east side of New Jersey avenue, between I and K streets south." Thus it appears that the home of Thomas Blagden on New Jersey avenue had been the home of his father, George Blagden.

In addition to being "chief stone cutter at the Capitol," George Blagden was a man conspicuous in many lines of business in Washington and prominent in the charities of his time. At the time of publication of Delano's directory George Blagden was one of the directors of the Bank of Washington, which then had its office on the east side of New Jersey avenue between B and C streets south, the site now covered by the House office building. Blagden's fellow directors at that time were George Calvert, Francis Tolson, John C. Herbert, Robert D. Sewall, Thomas Tingey, Samuel N. Smallwood, Samuel Miller, Frederick May, John Davidson, Andrew Way, jr., and Edward Cutbush. Samuel H. Smith was the president and William A. Bradley the cashier.

George Blagden's operations in real estate in Washington extend from 1794 to 1828, the year of his death, and all the deeds to which he was a party have passed under the Rambler's eye. He was a member of the first board of school trustees in Washington. In December, 1804, the subscribers to the fund "for schools for pay pupils and the children of the poor" named as trustees Thomas Munroe, Gabriel Duvall, Thomas Tingey, Robert Brent, Samuel H. Smith, and William Cranch. In the following July the city councils named these as trustees: Thomas Jefferson, John Tayloe, Nicholas King, John Dempsie, Joseph Bromley, vice James Barry, declined; George Blagden and William Brent.. This was a distinguished list of names, embracing the most prominent men of early Washington, including the President of the United States, and serves to fix in the Rambler's mind the standing of George Blagden at that time.

George Blagden was also one of the promoters and big stockholders in the Great Bridge Company, which built the first Long bridge, in 1808. The list of directors consisted of Daniel Carroll of Duddington, who was also the president; "George Blagden, Frederick May, Robert Young and William Harper. That bit of information is to be found in Bryan's History of Washington, and he had it from the manuscript minute book of the bridge company, now the property of Col. Frederick May. Allen C. Clark, in his work, "Greenleaf and Law in the Federal City," makes an occasional reference to George Blagden. The files of the National Intelligencer show that on June 3, 1808, Mayor Robert Brent called a meeting of citizens at Steele's Hotel for the 21st to consider the expedience of a plan to encourage domestic manufactures. Robert Brent was the chairman and John Law the secretary. Samuel H. Smith, editor of the National Intelligencer, offered a series of resolutions, in part declaring that "It is the duty of all sections of the Union to encourage the establishment and extension of domestic manufactures; that the city of Washington for various reasons is eminently fitted for attaining manufacturing importance, and that a plan should be reported to a subsequent meeting."

George Blagden, Samuel H. Smith, Cornelius Coningham, N. Cutting, Buller Cocke and Robert Brent were appointed a committee to form an association. At an adjourned meeting this committee submitted articles of association for the Columbia Manufacturing Company. Chairman Brent appointed nine commissioners to receive subscriptions for stock. The commissioners for Washington were George Blagden, William Cranch and William Brent. The company erected a cotton mill in South Washington and elected the following directors: Robert Brent, president; Nicholas King, Michael Nourse, William Cranch, Charles Jones, Samuel H. Smith, John P. Van Ness, George Blagden, Thomas Munroe and Huddleston.

The earliest reference which the Rambler has found to George Blagden in the records of Washington is a deed dated May 2, 1794, under which George Blagden bought from David Burns lots 2 and 3 and square 406 for 100 pounds, current money of Maryland. That square is bounded by E, F, 8th and 9th streets northwest. Lot 1 is the northwest corner of 8th and E, and lots 2 and 3 adjoin on the west, facing on E street. In that deed Blagden is described as "of Prince George's county, Md." In 1798 Blagden traded one of those lots for the lot at the corner of 8th and E, then owned by Francis Deakins of Montgomery county.

Blagden is a Scotch name, and as George Blagden was the chief stone cutter of the Capitol, the Rambler's theory is that he came from Scotland to work on that building, and later on the Rambler will show how efforts were made by Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and the commissioners of the federal city -- Thomas Johnson, David Stuart and Daniel Carroll -- to obtain European stone cutters and other foreign artisans, especially Germans, Scotchmen and Frenchmen, for work on the public buildings of Washington. The first record of George Blagden's connection with the Capitol is of the date of June 26, 1795. It is in a letter in the office of public buildings and grounds addressed by the then commissioners of the city, Gustavus Scott and William Thornton, to Edmund Randolph, Secretary of State. It is a statement of the discovery of bad work in the foundation of the Capitol, and the following is the closing paragraph:

We have not doubted but that this matter will be exaggerated, therefore we have thought it proper to state the thing as it really is. The Contractors are all discharged and a better set will, we expect, be engaged in a few days and it is our determination to have a person employed to attend constantly at the walls so as to see every course of stone or brick as it is laid on. Mr. Hoban and Mr. Blagden have been three days engaged in examining the whole of the walls and they report that by taking down about one

foot of the walls suggested and laying large bond stone the walls will be perfectly secure and sufficient and upon the North Wing the stone setters will begin work next week to lay the free stone.

Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to the commissioners, wrote from Philadelphia, March 8, 1793, in relation to the construction of the Capitol:

The President thinks it of prime importance to press the providing as great quantities of brick, stone, lime, plank, timber, etc., this year as possible. Do you not think it would be expedient to take measures for importing a number of German and Highlanders? This need not be to such extent as to prevent the employment of eastern laborers, which is eligible for particular reasons. If you approve of the importation of Germans and have a good channel for it you will use it of course. If you have no channel I can help you to one.

From Georgetown, on June 2, 1792, the commissioners wrote to Mr. Jefferson:

The introduction of Mechanics from Europe being thought by the friends of this city so advisable a measure, we have again taken up that subject. To hold out additional motives for Emigration we shall endeavor to concert a plan with some of the Scots Merchants to bring over some stone-cutters and others from that country. We request you also to fall on measures to procure about 100 Germans single men and as many of them stone cutters, masons and bricklayers as can be readily had.

Mr. Jefferson, on June 3, 1792, wrote aback that he thought he could do no better

with respect to the German Emigrants than to address the enclosed letter to Messieurs Van Staphorts and Hubbard of Amsterdam leaving it to yourselves to point out the number and descriptions of Persons you want and to open a correspondence with them yourselves directly on the subject.

In Chauncey Ford's "Writings of Washington" may be found a letter from President Washington, dated Philadelphia, December 18, 1792, addressed to the commissioners, and treating of the subject of foreign workmen. A portion of it follows:

Your letter to the Secretary of State dated, if I recollect rightly, the 5th instant intimating among other things that you failed in an attempt which had been made to import workmen from Scotland, equally with that of obtaining them from Holland, fills me with real concern, for I am very apprehensive that if your next campaign in the Federal City is not pressed with vigor it will cast such a cloud over this business and will so arm the enemies of the measure as to enable them to give it (if not its death blow) a wound from which it will not easily recover. No means therefore in my opinion should be left unessayed to facilitate the operations of next year. Everything in a manner, depends upon the celerity with which the public buildings are then carried on--Sale of Lots--private buildings--good or evil report--all, all will be regulated thereby. Nothing therefore short of the absolute want of money ought to retard the work.

The more I consider the subject the more I am convinced of the expediency of importing a number of workmen from Europe to be employed in the Federal City. * * * It is not however my wish that the idea of importing workmen should be confined solely to Germany--I think it ought to be extended to other places, particularly Scotland, from whence many good and useful mechanics may undoubtedly be had.

On the 4th of January, 1793, the commissioners of the federal city dispatched to France a Mr. Fenwick to secure workmen for the public buildings. He went with a special address to the municipality of

Bordeaux. This action was probably taken because Mr. Hallette, the architect of the Capitol at that time, and with Dr. William Thornton, author of the design of the building, was a Frenchman. Stephen Hallette came to the United States from France just before the American revolution and established himself as an architect in Philadelphia. He became the architect of the Capitol in 1792, and continued in that capacity until 1794, when he was succeeded by James Hoban, who, as surveyor of the public works of the federal city, had been connected with the construction of the Capitol.

Hoban was a native of Ireland who settled in Charleston, S.C., just after the revolution and his principal work in Washington was in designing and constructing the White House. At the laying of the southeast corner stone of the Capitol on September 18, 1793, Colin Williamson is named as the master mason. His name with others is inscribed on a silver plate that was deposited in the corner stone. Williamson was the master mason in June, 1794, for at that time there seems to have been some trouble with the masons employed on the Capitol, as on that date the commissioners sent a letter to Williamson, saying:

We desire you to inform the Masons who sent in a Memorial to us respecting the work at the Capitol that while we are happy at all times to receive any information from those engaged in the Public Service and their terms of work, we can never countenance any riotous or disorderly conduct. We are well informed that there are several of those who are at work at the Capitol who have issued threats against Mr. Hoban and Dermott Roe and that the latter has been for his own safety compelled to take out warrants against them.

It is clear that George Blagden was a prominent mason in the Capital in the following years.

At the city hall there is a power of attorney, January 19, 1806, to George Blagden from Archibald Swinton. It decites that "Archibald Swinton, mason, in Swinton, County Berwick, Scotland, brother German of deceased William Swinton, mason, of the city of Washington, appoints James Farquier, stonecutter of Philadelphia, and George Blagden, mason, of the city of Washington, attorneys to recover money due and to sell effects of the deceased."

Mr. Blagden met his death accidentally in 1826. The Rambler has searched the newspapers of that period for an account of the accident, but has not found it. On December 7, 1826, J. Edgar, commissioner of public buildings, in his report to the President on the work at the Capitol, said:

The work suffered a severe loss by the accidental death of Mr. Blagden, which happened early in the season. Possessing a high degree of science and practical knowledge of his profession, he had conducted in its most important branch the construction of the Capitol, almost from its commencement, with a precision and fidelity, which he carried late all the relations of life.

George Blagden's will was signed March 2, 1815, in the presence of John Kennedy and W. McGowan. Letters of administration were granted his widow and administratrix, Anne, June 15, 1826, her sureties being Lewis H. Machen and John P. Ingle, registrar of Christ Episcopal Church, Washington parish. In his will he wrote:

I do give and bequeath to my dear wife, Anne Blagden, all and whatever it hath pleased my heavenly father to bestow upon me, consisting either of money, lots, houses, stock of any kind together with all my personal property, either here or in England, with this one exception, that my worth man and friend, George, shall be free in one year from the date of my death.

A deed is at the city hall, showing that on July 25, 1806, Blagden bought from Thomas Hurdle of the county of Washington for \$150 a negro man named George, about nineteen years old. Blagden in his will made provision for the comfort of George.

George Blagden of City of Washington, D.C. (dtd. Mar. 2, 1815, probated June 10, 1826, Will Book 3)
To wife Anne Blagden, all money, lots, houses, stock and property either here or in England with only one exception of \$100 for my worthy man and friend George who shall also be free in one year; wife may wish assistance in settlement from friends Elias B. Caldwell and John McGowan.

Wits.: John Kennedy; William McGowan.

The Blagden vault is in Congressional cemetery. It was bought by George Blagden, but the date of his interment is not shown. There have been placed in that vault the remains of Walter Lowery's daughters, 1834; Mrs. Eliza Ellis, 1835; William Martin's child, 1835; Timothy Winn, 1836; Thomas Blagden's child, 1840; Mrs. Caroline Taylor, 1842; children of Thomas Blagden, 1849, 1851 and 1852; child of William Gunton, 1849; Mrs. R.M. Gunton, 1853; Emily S. Blagden, 1852; Gen. John A. Rawlins, Secretary of War, September 9, 1869; Thomas Blagden, February 6, 1870; George W. Blagden, 1887; Admiral William Rodgers Taylor, 1889; Elizabeth Silliman, 1892; Mary D. Blagden, 1907, and Laura Silliman Blagden, 1903. Some of these remains have been removed. Those of Admiral and Mrs. Taylor were taken to Newport and Elizabeth Silliman's remains were removed to Greenwood cemetery, New York. The remains of Gen. Rawlins were also removed.