

Tea and Fantasy

Fact, fiction, and revolution in a historic American town

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Chestertown, Maryland, is a place where what's past is present. That much is evident even to first-time visitors to this strenuously picturesque village on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay. The town's main thoroughfare, High Street, which slopes down to a tidewater river, is lined with colonial houses whose Flemish-bond brickwork and paneled shutters bespeak an era of long-vanished prosperity. Or rather, long-vanished, but recently returned. Thanks to well-heeled immigrants from Washington, Philadelphia, and beyond, those houses now sell in the seven figures, and their driveways, especially on weekends, gleam with sports cars and SUVs. What visitors don't immediately see is that the understated colonial charm is strictly policed, every proposed change to a façade scrutinized with inquisitorial rigor by an architectural review board. Appearances are everything.

But in the human landscape, too, the 18th century seems often to lurk not far beneath the surface. Two years ago, when I bought a house nearby, my lawyer was a man whose eighth-great grandfather brokered the town's original real-estate deal, in 1706, when he sold off part of his plantation to create the new port on the Chester River. One old-timer I met told me of hearing stories in his youth from an ex-slave on his father's farm, who in turn passed down oral history dating back to the Revolution and beyond.

Here, as in many such places, the actual events of the past have been gradually transformed through retelling. As in a slow process of fossilization—where the original creature becomes, over the course of many millennia, a

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sculpture of itself, similar in contour but wholly different in substance—the history seems almost to transubstantiate without human intervention. This became especially apparent to me not long ago, when I set out to delve into one of the town’s most cherished stories about itself.

May 23, 1774, is a legendary date in Chestertown’s history. If you had been standing on that day at the foot of High Street, you might have seen the local Sons of Liberty stealthily assemble, one by one, at the dockside to strike a blow against tyranny. Beyond them, anchored just off the town wharf, you might have seen the looming masts of the brigantine *Geddes*, newly arrived in port with a cargo of the hated tea that King George’s ministers had taxed—tea that the patriots of the 13 colonies had vowed would never sully their breakfast tables. You might have heard the faint creak of muffled oars, and then the startled cries of sailors surprised at their posts. You might have seen a desperate shipboard melee—and then heard several splashes as the crates of tea, followed by the sailors themselves, were tossed into the muddy water of the Chester River.

On the other hand, you might not have.

The story has been told—and greatly embellished—by generations of townsfolk. It has been enshrined in local histories, and thence picked up nationwide in tourist guides, textbooks, and scholarly works. Even the Library of Congress’s Web site mentions it as an episode on the nation’s road to independence. And every spring, thousands of tourists flock to Chestertown to witness a reenactment of the Tea Party, using as its centerpiece a painstakingly faithful replica of an 18th-century schooner that a group of townspeople built several years ago. The Memorial Day weekend festivities are accompanied by parades, pageantry, and raft races.

I had heard the story of the Tea Party since my first day in Chestertown. I’d repeated it enthusiastically to friends, students, and out-of-town visitors, especially since my office at Washington College is in an 18th-century waterfront building a few yards away from where the incident is supposed to have occurred. And then, last spring, I set out to teach a course that I called “Chestertown’s America,” surveying four centuries of our country’s history from this local, and somewhat eccentric, vantage point. In teaching the class, I relied largely on primary sources (since almost no serious scholarship exists on the history of Kent County, Maryland), and so when I prepared for the section on the American Revolution, I went looking for documents about the Chestertown Tea Party.

But when I played the old historian’s game of follow-the-footnotes—working my way back along a trail of references to find the original sources of the story—I hit a dead end in the late 19th century. Inquiries among local experts and archivists drew a blank. A search among the surviving records of early Chestertown (assisted by an enterprising student in my class, Erin Koster) also failed to find any definitive trace. I soon reached a somewhat awkward



The 2004 Chestertown Tea Party reenactment

conclusion: there was not a scrap of proof that the Chestertown Tea Party had ever happened. No known 18th-century letter, diary, court record, or newspaper account described what is supposed to have occurred.

Friends started warning me, only half-jokingly, that I'd better watch my back around town: people here can take the colonial past pretty seriously. A few reminded me about the *Simpsons* episode where Lisa discovers the secret pirate confessions of her town's revered founder, Jebediah Springfield, and ends up as a target for historical-society hit men.

By this time, however, I was hooked on the mystery, hit men or no. And the search was starting to turn up some pretty tantalizing hints and clues—circumstantial evidence of what might or might not have happened here in May of 1774. In the process, I found myself digging deep into the 18th century, and into the life of a small town in the not-yet-united colonies of British North America, during the final spring before the world turned upside down.

To reach Chestertown today, you drive for miles past the outer edge of mid-Atlantic suburbia, up a two-lane state road that winds through cornfields, past produce stands and peeling farmhouses. The town stands at a lazy bend in the broad tidal river, its water still as a lagoon. It is hard to imagine that in the 18th century, this place was an international port, but it was. Vessels from across the Atlantic sailed into the Chesapeake and then up the Chester River to load cash crops and deliver goods from overseas. Under British rule, the town was a designated “port of entry,” where an official of

His Majesty's Customs collected import duties. In the state archives in Annapolis, I recently discovered a customs officer's meticulously kept records for the "port of Chester" in the years just preceding the Revolution—documents that had apparently gone unexamined for two centuries. They note the arrivals of brigs and schooners from London, Bordeaux, Lisbon, Madeira, the Caribbean, the Cape Verde Islands.

The neatly ruled columns for the spring of 1774, lingering relics of a smooth-running imperial bureaucracy, belie the fact that Chestertown in that year was abuzz with revolutionary—and anti-revolutionary—excitement. For nearly a decade, some of the town's leading citizens had been involved in protesting the "taxation without representation" imposed by the mother country on her American colonies. They had worked successfully to help overturn the Stamp Act of 1765, which had placed a duty on all newspapers, government documents, and printed matter—only to see it replaced a few years later by even more onerous import fees on glass, lead, paint, paper, and tea. And

recently, the flames of local indignation had been fanned afresh.

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The gentry of Chestertown—stolid Water Street burghers like Thomas Smyth III and Thomas Ringgold V—might have seemed unlikely revolutionaries. They came from families of socially reactionary, culturally Anglophile tobacco planters, deeply rooted for more than a century in the soil of Kent County—families so hidebound that Thomas followed Thomas, generation after generation, as if each eldest son were a clone of the father who had preceded him, in an undifferentiated cycle of assemblymen, vestrymen, justices of the peace.

Moreover, there was an even more salient fact that might undercut these men's credentials as freedom fighters: they were almost all slaveowners. By the time of the Revolution, nearly half the people in Kent County were black, and were legally classified not as persons but as property; as late as 1770, the customs records reveal, slave ships still occasionally landed at the town wharf at the foot of High Street. Indeed, Ringgold's father had made much of his fortune running slavers from West Africa to the Chesapeake—a business that he oversaw with grim efficiency from his hulking mansion near the wharf (the building, incidentally, in which I now work). This elder Thomas Ringgold is blandly described in local histories as a "leading merchant" who was also a "prominent patriot"; the s-word is never mentioned. Yet his surviving papers make his true calling all too evident; they are infused with a sense of what would, in a different century and a different context, be called "the banality of evil." In a 1761 letter, Ringgold noted with cold calculation that aboard

one of his ships, which had left the Slave Coast with 320 men, women, and children, conditions in the Middle Passage had been so bad that by the time the vessel arrived in the Chesapeake, “we had but 105 left alive to sell, 11 of them so bad we were glad to get 11 pounds per Head for them.” And yet, just a few years after penning these words, he would defend American liberty as a Maryland delegate to the Stamp Act Congress in Philadelphia. Thomas Ringgold IV died in 1772, passing this ambivalent legacy, along with his large fortune and two houses on Water Street, to his son, Thomas V.

Kent County could be a harsh and authoritarian place for whites as well as blacks, as I found out when, also in the state archives, I unearthed a tattered volume of 1770s legal records. Justice was summarily dispensed at twice-annual sittings of the county court, by jurymen who were selected from among a small pool of well-to-do landowners. Sentences (almost always inflicted on those of a lower social class) included floggings, the pillory, brandings, and sometimes public hangings at the town gallows. Not just at the time of the Revolution, but for many decades afterward, Chestertown’s social order often seemed more medieval than democratic. (Indeed, the property ownership requirement for voting in town elections was not revoked until the 1960s.)

Yet for all the staunch conservatism of Chestertown and its Eastern Shore surroundings, the decades leading up to 1774 had brought momentous changes. Around midcentury, the tobacco farming of the colony’s earliest years gave way to a new, more reliable and lucrative crop: wheat. Before long, the grain and flour of the Upper Shore reached markets in the Caribbean and across the Atlantic, bringing a new degree of prosperity to Kent and neighboring counties—and with this prosperity, a new sophistication, even cosmopolitanism. Handsome new brick houses appeared along the sloping, muddy streets of Chestertown. Sailors from exotic ports of call congregated in its taverns. The town hosted performances by Shakespearean actors and a scientific demonstration of the newly discovered marvel of electricity. Local gentry began to hold balls, race thoroughbred horses, take social excursions to Philadelphia and Annapolis, and even read books and periodicals from London and beyond.

And so, on the eve of the Revolution, the Chestertown scene included not just the familiar Smyths and Ringgolds, but also the likes of William Carmichael, a rakish young bachelor from Round Top plantation, just across the river in Queen Anne’s County. Carmichael’s wealthy father, who possessed one of the largest private libraries in the colony, had sent him off to read classical literature at the University of Edinburgh, where the young man had imbibed both the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment and a sense of romantic identification with the republican heroes of ancient Greece and Rome. On his finger, Carmichael wore a signet ring with an emblem of his own invention: a fist brandishing a spear beneath the Latin motto “MANUS HAEC INIMICA TYRANNIS”—“This hand is the enemy of tyrants.”

Another sign of the new worldliness was the just-completed mansion that

Thomas Smyth had built overlooking the town wharf. Widehall (as it would be dubbed in the 20th century) was a house on a scale unlike anything Chestertown had seen, but even more important, its architecture spoke to new role models and aspirations. The front door imitated the architecture of a Greek temple, the high-ceilinged parlors were adorned with cornices and architraves in the Roman style, and the main hall flaunted a columned arcade that might have come straight from the *loggia* of a Florentine palazzo. There was nothing cramped or colonial about this house—nor, we may well suppose, about the mentality of its proprietor, the largest landowner and shipowner in the county.

Chestertown's residents had always considered themselves loyal Englishmen, supporting British efforts in the French and Indian War, faithfully toasting the king's health over bowls of punch, and marking royal birthdays during services in the Anglican church on the market square. But that loyalty had come under increasing strain. In 1758, when seven companies of redcoats took up winter quarters in Chestertown, their presence caused such tension that a pitched brawl broke out among soldiers, sailors, and local youths, ending in the death of a sailor and murder charges against two sons of prominent families. Moreover, many Kent Countians already had such deep roots in the New World that it had been three or four generations since anyone had set foot in the mother country. The ancestral tie to England grew slightly weaker with each passing year.

So by the early 1770s, as the whole English-speaking world followed the tumultuous events in Boston—a city already in near-rebellion against the Crown—it is not so surprising that many Marylanders identified more with their fellow colonists 400 miles to the north than with political leaders across the ocean. The Eastern Shore as yet had no newspaper of its own, but its inhabitants read the Annapolis and Philadelphia papers, which reported exhaustively on the news from New England: the growing civil unrest, the military occupation of Boston, the deadly affray between redcoats and street ruffians (reminiscent of what had happened in Chestertown a dozen years before), and finally the dumping of East India Company tea into Boston Harbor.

As representatives from all 13 colonies began assembling to confront the crisis, many of them passed through Kent County, which happened to lie on one of the Eastern seaboard's main overland routes. Travelers from the rest of Maryland, from Virginia, and from other southern states would be ferried across the Chesapeake from Annapolis to Rock Hall on the Eastern Shore, where they would continue on horseback through Chestertown (often stopping for food, drink, and lodging) and then up the peninsula to Philadelphia, New York, and points north; they would come back again on their return. Thus the town became not just a rest stop on the colonial I-95, as it were, but also a segment of the information highway by which news passed among the previously disconnected provinces.

In September 1774, for instance, we find Carmichael writing to a friend about a supper he had attended the night before at "Tom Ringgold's" house:

“Young Carroll of Carrollton was there in high spirits from Philadelphia. [He reports] General Gage intrenching himself in Boston afraid to leave the city & sea, I wish it may prove so. Lee is now at Philadelphia, crying Havoc & Let slip the dogs of War . . .” Charles Carroll of Carrollton and Richard Henry Lee, then both members of the first Continental Congress (and both later to become signers of the Declaration of Independence) were rising revolutionary stars whose names and faces obviously were already familiar to Chestertown. Indeed, in that same dining room the previous year, Ringgold had entertained another distinguished traveler from across the Bay: Colonel George Washington, passing through on his way to deliver his stepson to college in New York. Unfortunately, no record of the conversation at that 1773 gathering survives, but one can easily imagine the Virginian holding forth to Ringgold and his guests about the alarming state of current politics.

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Ringgold, Carmichael, and Smyth were almost certainly among the “number of respectable gentlemen—friends to liberty” who gathered at a local tavern (probably Worrell’s, at the corner of Queen and Cannon Streets) on May 13, 1774. The men had come together in an emergency meeting to respond to late-breaking developments in Boston, in London—and in Chestertown itself.

The only account of that day’s events is maddeningly vague, a report that an unknown participant sent the following week to Annapolis for publication in the *Maryland Gazette*. His grandiloquent dispatch began with a poetic quotation from Joseph Addison’s play *Cato*, about the Roman statesman who defended the republic (unsuccessfully) against the upstart tyrant Caesar:

Remember, O my friends, the laws, the rights,
The gen’rous plan of pow’r deliver’d down
From age to age, by your renown’d forefathers;
So dearly bought, the price of so much blood!
O! Let it never perish in your hands,
But piously transmit it to your children.

In this same spirit—of what might be called revolutionary conservatism—the Chestertown “friends to liberty” continued by asserting their staunch loyalty to the ancient constitution of Great Britain (“the most perfect under heaven”). But they also condemned the “corrupt and despotic ministry” that currently held sway in London, and called for a mass meeting of Kent County’s

citizens on May 18th to formulate a local response to the tea tax.

It was at that second meeting, held at the Kent County courthouse, that the participants read and approved the six declarations that came to be known as the Chestertown Resolves. First, since this was not yet an all-out rebellion, they acknowledged their allegiance to George III. Second, they swore enmity to all taxation without representation. Third, they asserted that Parliament's tea tax had been "calculated to enslave the Americans." Fourth, they agreed that any citizens found importing or purchasing dutiable tea "shall be stigmatized as enemies to the liberties of America." Fifth, they pledged to enforce these resolutions among their neighbors—if necessary, by shunning them for refusal to comply. Finally, they decided to disseminate these Resolves to the press.

And at the bottom of that column in the *Gazette*, the following brief and cryptic postscript appeared:

N.B. The above resolves were entered into upon a discovery of a late importation of dutiable tea, (in the brigantine *Geddes*, of this port) for some of the neighbouring counties. Further measures are in contemplation, in consequence of a late and *very* alarming act of parliament.

Those two sentences are the only contemporary record that even hints at the Chestertown Tea Party as it is traditionally recounted today. The next news from Kent County in the *Maryland Gazette* came two weeks later, in a report on yet another mass meeting at the courthouse held on June 2nd. This time, the citizens appointed a local "Committee of Correspondence" (with Smyth as chairman, and Carmichael and Ringgold among its members) to share information with patriots in the other colonies, and to work toward the repeal of the hated Parliamentary acts—a measure being taken in dozens of communities throughout America. There was no mention whatsoever of anything resembling a tea party, or indeed of the fate of the offending tea found on the *Geddes*—and the *Gazette*, the province's only newspaper, carried almost no news from Chestertown during the rest of the spring and summer.

Other possible sources are equally unhelpful or, worse, nonexistent. There are no known diaries from Chestertown during the period. The surviving minutes of the county court do not begin until November 1774. A few private letters written from Chestertown in May and June have turned up—including some by Thomas Ringgold and Thomas Smyth—but these mostly concern business and mention nothing about the tea controversy.

Perhaps one day a historian will find the proverbial smoking gun, in the form of a letter or diary that now sits forgotten in an archive or library, or even in a corner of someone's attic. (In fact, in a place like tidewater Maryland, this is less improbable than it might seem. I have seen 18th- and even 17th-century documents moldering unread in local manor houses.) Until then, however, the only thing to do is assemble the clues and play detective: in particular,

one can scrutinize that cryptic two-line postscript in the *Gazette* as closely as possible, examine the context in which it appeared, look for corroborating evidence, and try to decode its true meaning.

“the brigantine Geddes . . .”

In the Chestertown customs records for 1774, I found the *Geddes*. She was revealed as a locally built ship of 50 tons burden, one of the smaller vessels plying the transatlantic routes. (“Brigantine” or “brig” is a term for a two-masted vessel with square sails on the foremast, but not aft.) On May 7th, the brig arrived at her home anchorage after a crossing from London; her captain, John Harrison, commanded a crew of seven men. The cargo’s owner is listed as “Jas. Nicholson.” As to its contents, the customs officer originally wrote “European Goods per cockets.” (Cockets were separate manifests that would have listed the cargo in greater detail.) Then, after penning these words, he went back, inserted a carat after the word “European,” and wrote above it the tiny letters “& E.I.” This abbreviation stood for “East India”: in other words, possibly spices, possibly silk, possibly china—and possibly tea. The *Geddes* departed Chestertown on May 24th, bound for Madeira with her hold full of wheat and flour.

“of this port . . .”

The customs records do not reveal the name of the *Geddes*’s owner, and her possible connection to William Geddes, a local merchant who also served as Chestertown’s customs collector, cannot be proven. More interesting is the identification of James Nicholson as the owner of the brig’s cargo—including, most likely, the tea. The 37-year-old Nicholson was a prominent native of Chestertown who had grown up in the fine brick house that is now a bed-and-breakfast called the White Swan Tavern. He was also, interestingly enough, one of the two youths who was accused of killing the sailor in 1758, and then pardoned; not long after, he enlisted in the Royal Navy in the French and Indian War. Around 1771, his tempestuous youth apparently behind him, Nicholson returned to his hometown as a respectable shipping merchant. Despite his military service to the British Crown, he was, at least on the surface, no Tory—in fact, he affixed his name to the Chestertown Resolves and was appointed to the Committee of Correspondence listed in the *Maryland Gazette* two weeks after the alleged Tea Party. Nicholson’s involvement adds an extra twist to an already-perplexing tale.

“a late and very alarming act of parliament . . .”

This was almost certainly the Boston Port Bill, which Parliament had passed in late March; word of it reached America just around the time that the Chestertown Resolves were being drafted. (In fact, the *Geddes* herself, ironically enough,

might well have brought the news to Chestertown.) This law's passage had—to use a word that was coming into vogue at the time—electrified the colonists. The Port Bill ordered that until such time as the people of Boston paid the tea tax and reimbursed the East India Company for its spoiled goods, the city's harbor would be closed to all commercial shipping. Not a box or bale would be unloaded at Long Wharf; not a single brig or schooner would set sail past Castle William into Massachusetts Bay. It is understandable that this news had a particularly shocking effect among the shipping merchants of Chestertown, some of whom traded with New England.

“Further measures are in contemplation . . .”

Most tantalizing of all is the question of what was meant by these ominous-sounding “further measures . . . in contemplation” on account of the Port Bill news. It has been suggested, naturally, that this must refer to the Tea Party. But it seems more straightforward to conclude that it simply referred to the appointment of the Committee of Correspondence, as reported in the *Gazette* two weeks later. Dumping tea into the Chester River would have been a more logical response to the Tea Act than to the Port Bill—and it seems highly unlikely that the would-be perpetrators, had they been contemplating such a deed, would have advertised it ahead of time in the newspaper.

Along similar lines, if the Tea Party did occur, why was it not reported afterward in the press? It might be argued that the *Gazette*, a four-page weekly newspaper, was often spotty in its coverage, especially of Eastern Shore news. Or perhaps the “respectable gentlemen” of the Committee of Correspondence were embarrassed by the outburst of mob violence in their town. But the Tea Party in Boston Harbor had, in the six months since its occurrence, been imitated in towns up and down the Atlantic seaboard, and had invariably made headlines; the May 5th issue of the *Gazette* carried a laudatory account of one such recent incident in New York. Newspapers as far away as Rhode Island ran reports of the Chestertown Resolves. So if the Chestertown Tea Party was indeed a copycat crime—and if the local patriots were, as it seems from their Resolves, so eager to intimidate suspected Tories—why not trumpet it as widely as possible?

And yet . . . multiple sources make it clear that the *Geddes* was in the right place at the right time. It also seems certain that she was indeed carrying tea, and that this tea was discovered by local patriot leaders. Once they had found the illicit crates, how likely is it that they would have allowed the ship to land, given the political atmosphere in Chestertown at the time? Similarly, would they have allowed Captain Harrison to sail away with the tea, only to unload it at some other port? What, indeed, could they have done but toss it into the Chester River?

So imagine a slightly different scenario from the one that is reenacted at the foot of High Street every Memorial Day weekend. Imagine, let us say,

that Captain Harrison had loaded the tea in London of his own accord, with Nicholson unaware of its presence until it reached Maryland on May 7th. Imagine it being discovered—perhaps by a pilot or longshoreman in Chestertown, perhaps even by Nicholson himself—as the brig’s cargo was unloaded. Imagine the town abuzz with the news, and its leading merchants hastily convening at Worrell’s Tavern on the 13th, anxious to confront the crisis and dismayed at being branded as secret Tories. Imagine them—emboldened, perhaps, by the consumption of some non-dutiable beverages—heading from the tavern straight down to where the *Geddes* lay at anchor, boarding her and, with Nicholson’s consent (or even active participation), hurling the crates of tea into the river. Then imagine that they kept the details of the story out of the press in order not to embarrass one of their own, publishing just enough to confirm Chestertown’s loyalty to the patriot cause.

It could all quite possibly have happened this way. But did it?

The earliest definite mention of the Chestertown Tea Party that I discovered was in a slim paperbound volume, *Gem City on the Chester*, published locally in 1898. Its author, Frederick G. Usilton, was a newspaper editor and enthusiastic booster of his hometown—and the kind of journalist who never let the truth stand in the way of a good story. His account of the Tea Party runs as follows:

The brigantine *Geddes* arrived at Chestertown in 1774 with a small cargo of dutiable tea for some of the neighboring counties. The inhabitants assembled in town meeting on May 13, and held indignation meetings and threw the tea overboard. This same day the tea was thrown overboard in Boston Harbor.

Given his phrasing, Usilton clearly had read the coverage in the *Gazette*. But he is far from being an especially reliable narrator, starting with the fact that—as any schoolchild then, if not now, could have told him—the Boston Tea Party happened in December 1773, six months before the allegedly simultaneous event in Chestertown. His other writings are similarly riddled with errors and exaggerations. And yet all of the current references to the Chestertown Tea Party, in books, articles, and even respectable academic publications, can ultimately be traced to that passage of Usilton’s, later reprinted in his more widely circulated *History of Kent County, Maryland* (1916), and thence picked up in a 1932 article in the prestigious *Maryland Historical Magazine*, which lent it (undeservedly) a certain scholarly luster.

The year 1898 was still close enough to the Revolution that elderly inhabitants of Kent County might well have heard firsthand accounts of the Tea Party from their grandparents or great-grandparents. On the other hand, as with many family stories, the details might have gotten muddled through the years. Perhaps memories of the excitement in town over tea—the Resolves and the patri-

otic meetings—had slowly morphed into something more dramatic, more closely resembling the famous events at Boston. Perhaps the locals had unwittingly borrowed their story from nearby Annapolis, where in the fall of 1774 patriots burned the ship *Peggy Stewart* to the water line after finding a cargo of tea aboard. (This event was well documented in contemporary newspaper articles, letters, and memoirs.)

Or Usilton might simply have made it all up. At the end of the 19th century, when he wrote his book, America was in the midst of one of its periodic fits of colonial nostalgia: groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution were being founded, historic reenactments were being staged, and 18th-century American antiques were collected for the very first time. Towns and villages throughout the East avidly sought their own distinctive claims to Revolutionary fame—and in the absence of anything factual, many weren't above shameless invention. *Gem City on the Chester* clearly

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aimed to attract tourists and boost local pride, and a quaint tea party story suited its goals quite nicely. Its author might have come across the ambiguous 1774 *Gazette* article and decided to craft it into a more marketable commodity.

Decades later, during another national bout of Revolutionary fever, as the country approached its bicentennial, the Tea Party again took center

stage. In 1967, a group of Kent Countians organized the first-ever Tea Party Festival, which drew colonial buffs, craft vendors, and 25,000 tourists and has been repeated every year since. (It is unclear when and why the traditional date of the Tea Party was switched from May 13th to May 23rd: this might simply have been someone's slip of the pen, or a historian's attempt to have it accord better with the "further measures . . . under contemplation" on May 19th, or, most cynically of all, simply a 20th-century effort to push it closer to Memorial Day weekend.)

Most visitors have come away with little more sense of history than a glimpse of tea crates and tricorne hats floating in the river. For most locals, it's been simply an opportunity to do some hearty drinking and carousing, as well as perhaps to make a bit of money (both of which pursuits, today as in the 18th century, few Chestertown residents are wont to pass up). The true past slumbers through these festivities undisturbed.

A couple of months after word began to spread about my Tea Party apostasy, one of the reenactment's participants, Chris Cerino, wrote a song that he performed to guitar accompaniment at the town's restored vaudeville theater on High Street. It was called "Hey Look, Here Comes the Geddes!" and one verse ran as follows:

If I met Tommy Ringgold I wonder what he'd say
About what went down in Chestertown that fateful day in May
But if you didn't do it, Tom, I still think you're OK
'Cause we'll still have our festival and celebrate anyway

And I have to admit that I pretty much agree with Chris's song. The Chestertown Tea Party is one of those stories that, whether true or false in the most literal sense, have their own innate authenticity. To walk the streets of Chestertown today is to be transported at odd moments into another century and to catch glimpses of the world into which the American nation was born—a world in which native ground and personal identity were synonymous, and in which history's great changes arrived slowly, almost stealthily, drifting up the river with the tide.

No Revolutionary battles were fought here, besides some minor guerrilla skirmishes between local militiamen and bands of marauding Tories. Kent County's most important contribution to the war effort was probably the steady supply of grain it provided to the Continental Army, hardly the sort of thing to inspire tourist festivals and reenactments. The closest Chestertown came to a glimpse of major action was on Sunday, August 25, 1777, when, if you had been standing near the mouth of Worton Creek a few miles outside town, you would have seen a breathtaking sight: an armada of some 260 British warships anchored just offshore, carrying troops up the Chesapeake to march on Philadelphia.

In Chestertown and its environs, the American Revolution often felt less like a clash of nations than—in keeping with the spirit of the Tea Party story—like a conflict among neighbors, one that divided families and communities in much the same way that the Civil War would do here almost a century later. “I fear our peaceful Days in America throughout are over,” wrote Thomas Ringgold in the fall of 1774, and he was right. By the following year, residents of Chestertown had to choose once and for all which side they were on—and prepare to suffer the consequences. When a local minister publicly complained about the revolutionary government of Maryland, remarking “that there was more liberty in Turkey than in this province,” he was arrested and hauled off to Annapolis under armed guard. Another Kent County loyalist, James Chalmers, raised and commanded an entire regiment of Tories, who fought against Washington at the Battle of Monmouth, only to end up after the war as miserable exiles or prisoners, with their property confiscated and their former British protectors vanquished.

As for those Kent Countians whom the vessel and her cargo had moved to an act of patriotism—that is, the signers of the Chestertown Resolves—a number went on to more glorious deeds. Ringgold helped to draw up the constitution for the new state of Maryland before his untimely death in 1776. Thomas Smyth also served in the Maryland constitutional convention, built warships at his Chester River boatyard, and lost most of his fortune, includ-

ing Widehall, by devoting it to the Revolution. William Carmichael, who left Chestertown for Europe shortly before war broke out, spent most of his colorful career there, where he recruited Lafayette to the American cause, assisted Franklin and Jay in their diplomatic endeavors, served as minister to Spain, and became one of America's first overseas secret agents.

But perhaps the most intriguing epilogue of all is that involving James Nicholson, the Chestertown native, pardoned murderer, Royal Navy veteran, and owner of the tea aboard the *Geddes*. On June 6, 1776, when the Continental Congress announced the first captains appointed to the brand-new United States Navy, the name at the head of the list was none other than Nicholson's. (Clearly, any suspicions of Toryism that might have lingered in Chestertown had not reached Philadelphia.) As the most senior captain and commodore-in-chief in the Navy, Nicholson seemed poised to attain a brilliant military career and undying fame. Instead, he ended up with a singularly inglorious one, and a well-merited obscurity. Entrusted with command of the freshly built 28-gun frigate *Virginia*, he endlessly procrastinated on actually taking her to sea, finding one excuse after another to remain safe in harbor. When after almost two years of this he finally bestirred himself to sail, he had barely cleared the mouth of the Chesapeake before he ran the *Virginia* aground on a shoal, where she and her entire crew were promptly captured by a British warship without firing a single shot.

A contemporary engraving of Nicholson in his captain's uniform shows a long-nosed, thin-lipped man, his dark eyes slightly shifty: the kind of face, in short, that incites suspicion. Was he, in fact, playing a double game all along? Could his former neighbors in Kent County have told the distinguished gentlemen of the Continental Congress a few things that would have made their wigs curl? Perhaps it is fanciful even to wonder. And even then, anyhow, the importer of Chestertown's politically incorrect tea was not through with his Zelig-like historical career. Before his death in 1804, he would turn up again—piloting the festive barge that bore Washington to his inauguration in 1789, challenging Hamilton to a duel in 1795, scheming for Jefferson's election in 1800—a recurring and mysterious figure in the close-woven tapestry of the early Republic.

The wartime role of the brig *Geddes*, if any, is lost to history. After the putative Tea Party, she appears once more in Chestertown before the imperial annals of His Majesty's Customs in Maryland abruptly cease in the spring of 1775, never to resume. The brig's bones might lie almost anywhere beneath the wide Atlantic or its tributaries: on an Eastern Shore riverbed or Caribbean reef, or in some forgotten graveyard of ships in the Thames estuary or Massachusetts Bay. Near the foot of Chestertown's High Street, where she spent those storied weeks in 1774, the replica schooner used in the annual reenactment now stands moored, trim and handsome if a trifle too neat, too postcard-perfect. On long summer evenings, tourists and dog walkers stroll tentatively to the end of the dock to watch the river. Revolutions seem vanishingly distant. ❖