



An Important Smithfield Plantation Archive



By Jim Glanville and Ryan Mays

In October 2004, a group of Preston family descendants visited Smithfield Plantation to donate a box containing important original Preston family documents. The party consisted of Evelyn Byrd Henry Sargeant (1919-) and three of her daughters. Ms. Sargeant made the donation in memory of her late husband, Mr. George Harris Sargeant, Jr., (1912-1998). The authors of this article learned of the existence of this box and its remarkable contents in early January 2014. Subsequently, they located the box, examined and photographed its contents, and have just published a six-page document that itemizes the contents of the box and provides a full “finding aid” for them. (A finding aid is a document that assists researchers in their study of a collection of documents.)

Among the oldest original documents in the box are a Commission signed by Edmund Randolph, dated April 28, 1787, appointing John Preston (oldest son of William and Susanna Preston) to be Captain of the Montgomery County Militia; an original 1818 deed for 5 1/4 acres of land in Rockingham County granted to Governor James Pat-

ton Preston; and, an 1820 receipt for \$806 received from his brother Francis as “credit on his earlier note” and signed “Reed John Preston”.

The only item in the box that is not a document is a lock of the hair of Nickette [Nicketti] Buchanan Floyd (1819-1908). She was a daughter of Governor John and Letitia Preston Floyd.

The box contains two original letters handwritten by Letitia Preston Floyd (1779-1852). She was born at Smithfield and was the sixth daughter of William and Susanna Preston. She married future Virginia Governor John Floyd in Kentucky in 1805.

The first of these two original letters, which is just two pages, was previously unknown. Letitia wrote it at Thorn Spring (near modern-day Pulaski) on June 27, 1830. It begins, “My dear Sally Let me embrace you cordially as a child as the beloved wife of my first born son. ...” Sally was Sarah Buchanan Preston (1802-1879), the daughter of Francis Preston (brother of Letitia Preston Floyd) and Sarah Buchanan Campbell Preston of the Salt Works in Washington County. Three weeks before Letitia wrote this letter,

Sally had married Letitia’s son, the future Governor John Buchanan Floyd, in Washington County, Virginia.

In contrast to her short and unknown 1830 letter, the most significant document in the box is a second letter in Letitia’s handwriting that is 33 pages long and very well known. This *original* “My Dear Rush” letter was written as a record of early Preston family history and addressed to her fifth son, Benjamin Rush Floyd. She wrote from her home at Cavan, in Burke’s Garden, in Tazewell County, and dated it February 22, 1843. The location of this original document was long unknown; however, a copy was made in 1846 by Letitia’s son-in-law George Frederick Holmes. That copy was subsequently published in 1880 in four parts in the *Richmond Standard* newspaper with the collective title “Incidents of Border Life in Virginia as Related by Mrs. Letitia Floyd in a Letter to Her Son Colonel Benjamin Rush Floyd”. The newspaper articles were edited by the well-known Richmond historian Robert A. Brock, who added his own footnotes to them. This widely discussed and widely cited letter (in

its newspaper version) is the earliest historical memoir about the people and events of the early settlement of Southwest Virginia—told as Letitia Preston Floyd remembered them. Her letter tells of many things that can be found nowhere else in the historical record. Online versions of this document can be readily found through a search for “Letitia Preston Floyd memoirs”.

Other letters in the box that date from the twentieth century are to and from Preston descendants who at one time or another owned these important Letitia Preston Floyd originals. While these later letters do not absolutely establish an unbroken chain of possession of the “My Dear Rush” original, taken collectively they make a strong and convincing case that these letters remained privately in the hands of family members for 160 years before they were brought to Smithfield in 2004.

Plans are presently under discussion to exhibit or display some of these documents—perhaps in connection with the Preston Family Reunion next August.

