

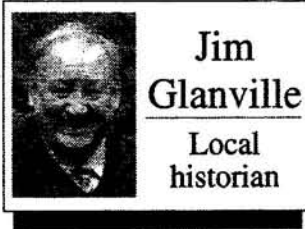
The Founding Father and the Christiansburg Baby

The Founding Father was the Pennsylvania physician and chemistry professor Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), an important Revolutionary era patriot who signed the Declaration of Independence, served as a Pennsylvania delegate to the Second Continental Congress, and as Surgeon General for the Continental Army. Dr. Benjamin Rush died on April 19, 1813.

The Christiansburg Baby was Benjamin Rush Floyd, the fifth son of Dr. John Floyd (a future Virginia Congressman and future Virginia Governor) and his wife Letitia Preston Floyd. This son had been born on 10 December 1811 at the Smithfield Plantation near Blacksburg. The following year, the baby was living with his parents in Christiansburg, where his father Dr. John Floyd had recently set up a medical practice. Dr. Floyd had received much of his medical training in Pennsylvania, part of it as a student of Dr. Benjamin Rush.

The story of the Founding Father and the Christiansburg Baby is told in two letters. The first letter, written on April 21, 1812, was from the Founding Father to the five-month old baby. The second letter was written on July 7, 1813 in Christiansburg, and acknowledged the death three months earlier of the Founding Father. This second letter was sent by the baby's mother to the editor of Niles' Weekly Register, a Baltimore-based weekly news magazine, published and edited by the Pennsylvanian Hezekiah Niles. Along with her letter to the editor, the proud mother enclosed the Founding Father's letter to her child. On 24 July 1813, promptly after receiving the correspondence, the editor published, at the top of his front page under the headline "Letter of Dr. Benjamin Rush," both Rush's letter and the accompanying transmittal letter from Letitia Preston Floyd.

The Founder's letter is addressed to "Master Benjamin Rush Floyd." It begins with the salutation "My dear



name-sake," and closes with the salutation "From your friend and name-sake" and a signature. It principally consists of maxims of good advice for life such as one might give to any young person: "honor and obey your parents," "learn your catechism," "avoid bad company," "be attentive to your studies," "live temperately," and other suchlike sentiments.

Virginia historians have apparently not noticed this letter. However, the letter has definitely caught the attention of historians of baseball. In one section of the letter, Dr. Rush confesses to being ashamed at the large amount of time he "wasted" as a boy playing "cat and fives and steal-clothes." Students of baseball have taken this phrase to refer to some precursor version of our traditional national pastime that began in the 1840s. They write about the letter in the context of their sport's development.

Mrs. Floyd's transmittal letter was written three months after the Founder's death. She wrote to the editor that while it was far beyond her capacity to properly eulogize the illustrious man, it was to "the friendship and skill of the immortal Doctor Rush" that both she and her husband owed their lives. She also wrote that an "impulse of a mother's heart prompted me to name a very promising child after the idolized friend of my husband."

Mrs. Floyd has been recently in the news in connection with the project currently underway in the archives in Christiansburg in the jurisdiction of the Circuit Court of Montgomery County Clerk Erica Williams. Thanks

to a grant that the Library of Virginia obtained from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, three archivists are currently hard at work organizing and digitizing the chancery court records (records of civil suits) stored in the Montgomery County Court House. Library of Virginia archivist Sarah Nerney from Richmond is on temporary full-time assignment to the project, and Regan Shelton and Scott Gardner are working as local contract archivists.

One of the civil suits uncovered from the courthouse archives, and dating from 1848, pitted Letitia Floyd against the executors of the estate of Elizabeth Madison (Letitia's deceased oldest sister). Letitia claimed that the executors had denied her a proper share of their mother's legacy. The judge agreed, and awarded Letitia \$218.38 plus interest.

In a Library of Virginia blog posting on Jan. 23, local archivist Regan Shelton noted that the case involved two regionally well-known Virginia families, the Prestons and Floyds. Shelton also observed that while much of the history of these families revolves around the military, economic, and political exploits of the men, this particular suit reveals "great politicking" among the females as well.

In 1888, the historians Robert Brock and Virgil Lewis wrote that Mrs. Floyd "possessed mental traits of a high order." As my collaborator Ryan Mays and I are presently documenting, the growing historical record about Letitia Preston Floyd demonstrates that she was a person of considerable intellectual skills and a force to be reckoned with. She clearly understood the historic significance of the letter from the Founder to her young son.

Jim Glanville is a retired chemist living in Blacksburg. He has been publishing and lecturing for a decade about the history of Southwest Virginia.