

Soldier John Grigsby, 1720-1794

John Grigsby, the fourth child of Charles Grigsby and Sarah Wilkerson, was born in 1720 in Stafford County and grew up on the plantation of his father. Before he was 20 years old he had joined the first expeditionary forces from the colonies to sail and fight on other lands. The circumstances relating to this event are of interest, for John, according to historians of the Grigsby family, became a “companion-in-arms” of Lawrence Washington (half-brother of George Washington and his elder by about 14 years) and was henceforth known as “Soldier John”.

Geographically, the Grigsby plantation on the south bank of the Occoquan and Potomac Rivers was in close proximity to Ferry Farm and lands across the Occoquan owned by Lawrence and his father Augustine Washington. In those days of few residents on large areas of land they could well have called neighbors. The decision by the Government in London to use men from the colonies in America for their land force in England’s declared war with Spain, was the first time this had been done. Of the 3,600 men supplied, by the colonies, Virginia supplied four companies of 100 men each. One of these companies was commanded by young Lawrence Washington (about 22 years old) who had obtained his commission from the Colonial ranking officers of the British Crown. The men who enlisted were to have the same rank and pay as British regulars and they were to be supplied with arms and uniforms - and were promised their proper share of booty. The men were to assemble in Annapolis, Maryland for instructions, and exercise in their military duties. They sailed in the fall of 1740. Lawrence Washington’s company could well have included his neighbor, John Grigsby.

Of the campaign on Carthaginian fortifications (Columbia, South America) much is a matter of historical record. There were successes, but all that was hoped to gain was not accomplished. Many died of yellow fever; more than of bullets it is said. One report states that Captain Washington and his troops were mentioned for their gallantry. Within two years, they had returned to Virginia. There is little evidence that indicated they received more than their uniform and the “experience” for their services.

Upon his return, John Grigsby found that his father, Charles Grigsby, had died. The will of Charles stated, “To my son, John Grigsby, the remaining part of my ... at his return, and he not returning, I give to my son Wilkinson Grigsby.” In the year 1746, John Grigsby married Rosanna Etchison and shortly thereafter moved from Stafford to Culpepper County (then Orange County) and settled north of the Rapid Ann (Rapidan) River.

The first child born to John and Rosanna was James Grigsby. The date is recorded as November 10, 1748 and the place was Culpepper County, Virginia. There followed John Grigsby, October 15, 1752; Charles Grigsby, April 6,

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1755; Sarah Grigsby, December 30, 1757; and William Grigsby, September 6, 1761. The death of Rosanna followed shortly after the birth of William and is recorded as '61 or '62.

In 1764, John Grigsby married Elizabeth Porter, daughter of Benjamin and Ann (Campbell) Porter of Orange County, Virginia. Elizabeth, born February 27, 1734 was 30 and John Grigsby was 14 years her senior. Eight of their nine children were born here [Culpepper County] between 1766 and 1778 - the ninth, Reuben, was born in Rockbridge County, 1780.

The record in residence in Culpepper County does not reveal much detail of their activities. It is to be presumed he followed the cultivation of his lands and the growing of tobacco. These were the years leading to the break with English rule and the Declaration of Independence. In the early 1760's, England had just about won the French and Indian War, ousting France from its best territorial claims on the continent and had control of the seas. It then began to tighten controls on the colonies by stricter enforcement of existing laws, new taxation and attacks on colonial rights of self-government. A sense of unity was built in the colonies by resistance to these policies. They wanted more self-government, not less. Before the first shot was fired, April 18, 1775, Virginia had declared itself a commonwealth.

Actual fighting between the British and American patriots did not occur on Virginia soil until the final year, 1881, and by October, with Cornwallis' troops surrounded by American forces at Yorktown, he surrendered. Virginia furnished many trained troops, materials, supplies and outstanding leaders. Virginia maintained her own State Navy, and her ships were very active. As the war progressed, many of the men recruited were farmers and tradesmen who knew little of military discipline. When they considered their services were not needed for some pressing engagement, they simply went home to look after their families, farms, or businesses. At times, when they did not answer a roll call, they were marked as deserters. Frequently, men so marked, returned to server their terms of enlistment and were given honorable discharges. Such was the case when smallpox hit the regiment of Colonel Grayson and many died. Those charged with desertion obviously were fleeing the dread disease rather than their military duties.

It is a matter of record and the opinion of many historians writing of "Soldier John" Grigsby, that he served as a Captain during one period of the War. Records of the lists of revolutionary soldiers of the period did not identify as to the place of residence or other identification but Campbell in 1860 published a *History of the Colony and Ancient Dominion of Virginia* wherein he identified "John Grigsby of Stafford, as one of the men who migrated to the Valley of Virginia (Culpepper) and afterwards was engaged in the Revolution. He was progenitor of that family (Grigsby) in western Virginia (Rockbridge)." McCormick, 1897, says John Grigsby commanded a company in the 13th Regiment of the Virginia Line during the Revolutionary War. When the War began, 1775, John Grigsby was 55 years of age. By 1779, he had moved from Culpepper west into Rockbridge (then Augusta) County.

In 1774, another little war was being fought between Indians and whites on the western frontiers of Virginia. Sometimes said to have been caused by Lord Dunmore, then Governor of Virginia, to prevent Virginians from taking part in the approaching war with England, the list of men serving in Captain Nalle's Company of Volunteers from Augusta, Virginia includes... John Grigsby. John Grigsby (Jr.), son of "Soldier John" Grigsby, would have been 22 years old and of an age, and with a tradition of his father, to have been active in this campaign. It would have been in the further tradition of these early Grigsby's for the son John (Jr.) to have reported to his father and brothers the opportunities for land acquisition and farming. It is significant to note that by 1777, James Grigsby, older brother of John (Jr.), had moved to Rockbridge County and had begun to develop plantations which were later transferred to his sister, Sally [Sarah], and her husband (Thomas Welch) and his father "Soldier John".

"Soldier John" Grigsby and his family, the youngest had but one year, moved to Rockbridge County in 1779 and settled the plantation known as Fruit Hill, a few miles south of present Lexington and bordering Buffalo Creek. From the records gathered by the Grigsby Family historians on this period in Rockbridge County, there are three of particular interest: the Seven Hills of Rockbridge, the Falling Springs Presbyterian Church, and the visit of the Marquis De Chestellux. Each, in its own way, throws considerable light on the life and times of this Grigsby family during the period 1779-1794. [All three items are found in *Memorabilia I. More information can be found on this family in Memorabilia II, pp. 341-347, written by W. H. Grigsby in 1878.*]

Source: unknown author, *The Early Grigsby's in Virginia, Part 1*, typed paper in NGFS files.

(below) *The Gravestone of Soldier John Grigsby*

