

## **The Tyler Connection**

By Barbara Glakas

President John Tyler (1790-1862) was born in Charles City County, Virginia, located along the James River, west of Williamsburg. His family had long roots in Virginia, dating back to Colonial Williamsburg. His father, John Tyler Sr., was the governor of Virginia from 1808 to 1811. Their descendants, however, reached all the way to today's Herndon!

In the Tyler family tradition, John Tyler attended the College of William and Mary, graduating in 1807. Tyler entered the bar and then started a legal practice in Richmond. In 1811, at age 21, Tyler was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates. That same year, after the onset of the War of 1812, Tyler organized a militia company to help defend Richmond, a unit called the Charles City Rifles. In 1816 he was elected as a Representative to the U.S. Congress. Citing illness, he declined to seek reelection in 1820 and return to private law practice. Nonetheless, he eventually returned to state politics, and was reelected to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1823. Next, he was elected as governor of Virginia in 1825. He served as Vice President of the United States in March of 1841. But after President William Henry Harrison died a month later, Tyler became President, a position he held until 1845.

After his presidency, Tyler retired to his Sherwood Forest plantation along the James River, where he engaged in farming. In 1861 he was elected to the Virginia Peace Conference held in Washington, D.C., a conference whose goal it was to prevent a war. At the same time, he was also elected to the Virginia Secession Convention. Tyler gave up on the possibility of compromise and voted for secession. He served in the Confederate Congress until he died in 1862.

What does all this have to do with Herndon? John Tyler had fifteen children, the most children of any other American president. And some of his descendants lived in Herndon. Tyler had eight children with his first wife, Letitia Christian Tyler: Mary, Robert, John, Letitia, Elizabeth, Anne, Alice and Tazewell. His wife died of a stroke while in the White House in 1842. Tyler re-married in 1844 to Julia Gardiner Tyler. By his second wife he had seven more children: David, John A., Julia, Lachlan, Lyon, Robert and Pearl.

Fast forward to the year 2021. A letter was found in the files of the Herndon Historical Society's Depot Museum. The letter was dated 1901. It was handwritten on cardstock letterhead paper from the College of William and Mary, from the President of the College of William and Mary, Lyon G. Tyler. Lyon Gardiner Tyler (1853-1935) was the son of John and Julia Tyler. He was writing to someone named Leticia Tyler Semple, informing her that the college board had passed a resolution in which they agreed to set aside a spot for her to erect a commemorative monument or table on the "old Palace ground" at the college. It did not say what the monument/table would be commemorating.

After some research, it was discovered that Letitia Christian Tyler Semple (1821-1907) was Lyon's half-sister, born to John and Letitia Tyler. Letitia's husband was James Semple, who had

served as a Naval paymaster for the U.S. Navy, and later for the Confederate Navy. James was also a graduate of the College of William and Mary. He died in 1882. A monument was erected on the grounds of William and Mary to James Semple and it is presumed that this was the monument for which his wife had requested a space. Interestingly, some websites indicate that James Semple may have been associated with the lost Confederate gold that he was entrusted with after Jefferson Davis fled Richmond at the end of the Civil War. Letitia left her husband after the Civil War and opened a school on Baltimore, called the Eclectic Institute. Later still she lived at the Louise Home in Washington, D.C., a home for elderly distinguished women who found themselves in poverty.

The letter that was found in the Herndon Depot Museum was in an envelope. Written on the outside of the envelope was a note that said, "Found in the old Charles Rider house." Charles Rider and his wife, Maria Letitia Gresham Rider, lived on Monroe Street in Herndon in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Back-tracking the family history on Ancestry.com, it was found that Maria Rider was the half-sibling of Sallie Breeden Gresham Jones, wife of Robert Tyler Jones, grandson of President John Tyler.

That brings us to another connection in Herndon to John Tyler. Many people who live in Herndon may be aware that the old McMillen Farm – formerly known as Willow Springs Farm that was located on Dranesville Road directly behind Herndon High School - was sold in 2019. In October of 2021 the buildings on the remaining 5.5 acres of the farm were razed and the lot was cleared in preparation for the construction of a new single-family neighborhood called the McMillen Farm subdivision.

John Richard (1867 – 1944) and Mary McMillen (1874 – 1949) bought 118 acres of this land off of Dranesville Road in 1906. They built a home and established a dairy farm there. One of their daughters was Frances Strother McMillen Jones (1894 – 1960). Frances married Louis Armistead Jones (1893-1961), the son of Robert Tyler Jones and grandson of President John Tyler. Robert Tyler Jones (1843-1895) had been born in the White House during the Tyler administration.

Frances and Louis Jones's family lived on the McMillen Farm. One of their children was Margaret McMillen Jones (1923 -2016). Margaret married George F. Coomber (1925 – 2011) and they continued to live on the McMillen Farm throughout their lives. The Coomers had a daughter named Virginia Tyler Coomber (1964-2000), who predeceased her parents. Highly interested in the arts, in 1968 the Coomers remodeled the circa 1850s barn that was on the property, creating Coomber Hall. The Coomers operated a school of music and dance. Over the course of years, many local residents recall the Coomers hosting many events there, including recitals, banquets, weddings and corporate events.

Immediately after the McMillen farmland was cleared in 2021, some members of the Herndon Historical Society walked the empty land, reminiscing about the old farm. Found in a pile of dirt was a 1983 nine by six-inch cream-colored book entitled, *“Vital Facts, Chronology of the College of William and Mary.”* It’s first edition was dated 1921. The book was very dirty and the pages were all askew, apparently ravaged by a backhoe during the excavation of the property. The book recounted highlights of the history of the College of William and Mary. Handwritten on the front cover of the book were the words, “Pg. 14, 18.” Turning to those pages we could see on page 14 was a photo of President John Tyler that was circled in ink. Not only did this page note that Tyler graduated from the college, but it also noted that he had become a chancellor of the school in 1859, serving in that capacity until his death in 1862. Turning to page 18, circled in ink again was a photo of Lyon G. Tyler, who served as president of the college from 1888 to 1919. The Coomers evidently kept track of their Tyler heritage.

Many descendants of President John Tyler - members of the Rider, Jones, McMillen and Coomber families - are buried in Herndon’s Chestnut Grove Cemetery. And, amazingly, Harrison Ruffin Tyler, son of Lyon Gardiner Tyler Sr., is the last surviving grandson of President Tyler, and still lives in Virginia today, as of the writing of this article.

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*About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at [www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org).*

*The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at [www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org), and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.*

*Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact [HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com](mailto:HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com).*