

*The History of Holt House
Washington, DC*



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The History of Holt House

Holt House, probably built before 1814, is intimately linked to the early history of both Washington, DC and the nation by such prominent figures as Thomas Johnson, Benjamin Stoddert, Thomas Jefferson, Dr. William Thornton (first Architect of the Capitol), Benjamin Mackall, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Jackson. It has been owned by the Smithsonian Institution since 1890, and is the oldest building under its auspices. It was listed in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites in 1964 and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

While Holt House is one of the great country-style estates built during the early years of the new Federal City, it remains a mystery as to who built it and when. The chain of ownership and the backgrounds of the owners of the land on which the house sits suggest it could have been constructed no later than 1812. It seems most likely that the house was built by George Johnson, and if so, his connections to Dr. William Thornton, first Architect of the Capitol, suggest that that Thornton may have a hand in the design of Holt House. If the house were built before George Johnson, through Thornton's positions as a City Commissioner, president of the Bank of Columbia, and as a Quaker, Thornton also had connections with the previous owners of the property before the Johnsons (Benjamin Stoddert, Walter Mackall, and Jonathan Shoemaker), indicating that he was probably familiar with the property even before a house was constructed on it.

The land on which Holt House sits was originally part of a tract of land acquired from the Beall family in 1793 by Benjamin Stoddert. Stoddert served as Captain in the Revolutionary Army, Secretary of the Board of War (1779-1781), was a merchant in Georgetown, co-founder and President of the Bank of Columbia (1794), and first Secretary of the Navy. It was probably Stoddert who built Columbia Mills on the property in the 1790's.¹ Despite his prominent position, Stoddert's land speculation left him land rich and cash poor. Perhaps to help increase his cash flow, he constructed a flourmill on this parcel of land.

In December of 1800, Stoddert sold the property, referred to as "Pretty Prospect" to his friend Walter Mackall. The deed included "the buildings, improvements, privileges, advantages and appurtenances."² These "buildings" may be a reference to only the mill structures, but may also have included some form of a residence for a mill manager. Architectural evidence suggests that the west wing of Holt House may have been built earlier than the rest of the house and may have served as a small residence. If a house the present size of Holt House existed at this time, it would probably have been significant enough a structure to be mentioned separately in the deed.

Walter Mackall came from Calvert County, Maryland, served in the Maryland House of Delegates, and was a wealthy land holder in both Maryland and Washington, DC. His brother, Benjamin Mackall, married Christina Beall, whose father Brooke Beall, was a wealthy shipping merchant in Georgetown, sending great quantities of grain and tobacco to England. When the government moved to Washington in 1800 and when William Thornton was serving as a City Commissioner, Benjamin Mackall was one of those in charge of the transfer of the government books from Philadelphia.³ Benjamin may have become involved in the milling part of his father-in-law's business.

Walter Mackall owned Pretty Prospect for only four years. He may have originally taken an interest in the mills due to his brother Benjamin's connection to the Beall family business. This was also a period of great land speculation in the new Federal City, and the time when large country-style houses were being constructed in Georgetown and on the outskirts of the city. Mackall may have built the present house or expanded a smaller, pre-existing house on speculation of increased resale value.

In 1804, Mackall sold the property, which then consisted of the existent "mills, mill seats, way waters, buildings, and improvements" to Pennsylvania Quaker and miller, Jonathan Shoemaker for \$3,800 with an additional mortgage for a total cost \$9,600.⁴ He arrived with his family of five sons and one daughter to operate the mills. While the deed acquired by Shoemaker now mentions the mills, it still does not refer to a house on the property. Problems at Columbia Mill and a dispute with Thomas Jefferson forced the Shoemakers to sell the property and relocate to Shadwell, Virginia to help operate Jefferson's mills there.

The Shoemakers were among the earliest Quaker settlers in the area and traveled far to attend meetings. As a former Quaker, Mrs. Roger Johnson may have known Jonathan and Elizabeth Shoemaker as they may have attended the same Quaker meetings in Indian Springs, Maryland. When the first Quaker meeting was held in Georgetown in 1806, the Shoemakers may have made the acquaintance of architect William Thornton then,⁵ but they sold the mills only three years later.

The fact that Shoemaker took a mortgage to acquire the property and sold it for less than his original purchase price suggests that he was not in a financial position at this time to construct a large house the size of Holt House, had it not already existed when he bought the property. Additionally, his Quaker beliefs would suggest a more modest lifestyle, as he relied on his family and not employees or slaves to run the mills, and would not have allowed for managing a house of this size as well. Ultimately, the Shoemaker family was prosperous, and Pierce Shoemaker returned to Washington and purchased what is known today as Pierce Mill on Rock Creek Park.

In 1809, Jonathan Shoemaker sold the property for \$7,500 to Roger Johnson, of Fredrick County, Maryland,⁶ the younger brother of Maryland's first governor, Thomas Johnson. This was an investment on Roger Johnson's part, as he already owned two forges, a glass works, and a plantation in Frederick County and remained at his home "Bloomsbury," while he sent his son George to manage Columbia Mills.

Around 1809 or 1810, George Johnson is wed to Elizabeth Dunlop, daughter of wealthy Georgetown merchant James Dunlop, and the niece of Robert Peter (the builder of Tudor Place and designed by Dr. William Thornton). There is evidence that George was married by 1810 and may have been living at the mill property by then, as Mrs. Elizabeth Peter Dunlop (George's mother-in-law) sent three house slaves to her daughter in that year,⁷ which would probably not have occurred were they living with the Dunlops.

If George Johnson had built what is now Holt House, there were multiple connections between George and William Thornton that suggest that Thornton may have had a hand in its design. Anna Maria Thornton's diary indicates that Thornton's friends openly asked her husband for free advice and that he was busy drawing up plans for others houses between 1811 and 1812, for which he never charged.⁸ For George Johnson, connections between himself and Thornton included the fact that Thornton had an ongoing business relationship with his father-in-law, James Dunlop, through the Bank of Columbia in the acquisition of loans for Thornton's real estate purchases.⁹ Thornton was also the designer of Tudor Place built by Elizabeth Johnson's uncle, Robert Peter, and was under construction during the early years of George's marriage to Elizabeth. Mrs. Thornton and Martha Custis Peter, Robert's wife and Elizabeth Johnson's aunt by marriage, were close friends and watched the burning of the Capitol by the British in 1814 together from the dining room of Tudor Place.¹⁰ Additionally, George Johnson and William Thornton were neighbors. Pretty Prospect abutted Thornton's farm, located on Taylor Lane (now the 1800 block of Columbia Rd). It is known that Thornton owned this farm by 1811, writing correspondence from "Kalorama,"¹¹ thus placing him next to Pretty Prospect by that year. George Johnson would have had to pass through Thornton's property in order to reach Georgetown.

Beginning in 1812, George Johnson began borrowing large sums of money in order to rebuild the mills after they burned, employing a millwright to build "the best mill possible,"¹² and possibly may have used some of that money to construct a new house, or enlarge an existing house on the property as well. Per-

haps the first reference to a "house" on the property appears in an 1818 letter¹³ from George Johnson to his father-in-law, James Dunlop. He is concerned that the house (which he refers to in the letter as "my house," "in town") would be attached with a lien due to his large debts, and is in hopes of renting it out. Possibly, George owned another house in Georgetown at that time as well. While "in town" in present-day terms generally refers to an urban center, because George Johnson is writing from Frederick, he may be referring to Washington in general. There have been no records discovered to-date that show any evidence of another residence for George Johnson other than Pretty Prospect. George's financial problems, beginning as early as 1814, suggest that he was not in a position to construct a large house after about 1812, due possibly in part to the financial impact of the British blockade of the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac at that time.

In 1818, due to the extent of George's debts, Roger Johnson attempted to intervene on behalf of his son. Only two days after George's letter from Frederick, Roger also writes to James Dunlop. In his letter to Dunlop, he says that he hopes to sell his lot near the mill in the spring, then later to "sell the half of his Mill" (which he never did). Roger also asks James Dunlop to assume payment on half of George's debt, as he considered him partially responsible as the under signer of the loans.¹⁴ In his letter to Dunlop, Roger makes no separate reference to a house in town, only to the lot near the mill. But, according to Smithsonian records, a month before this letter was sent, Roger had already transferred the deed for the mill to the Bank of Columbia, with George's father-in-law, James Dunlop serving as trustee "to set up and sell at public sale for cash or upon credit" against George's debts, which totaled \$28,161.55 with interest. The deed transfer encompassed "the Mill houses, dwelling houses, buildings, improvements."¹⁵ But, Roger maintained possession of 13 3/4 acres of Pretty Prospect, which later became known as the Holt House property, possibly in an effort to ensure his son and his family had a place to live.

It is uncertain who was paying the mortgage between 1818 and 1823, but in fear of losing his home, in 1823 George approached his cousin Louisa Johnson Adams (wife of John Quincy Adams) in hopes that John Quincy would acquire the mortgage from the bank. Adams mortgaged his house in order to purchase the mill in 1823 for \$20,000, and placed George on salary to continue to manage the mills, with the understanding that George would later repurchase back half the mills from Adams.¹⁶ Within months of purchasing the property, Adams became President.

Adams had hoped that the mills would be able to provide him some income and security in his retirement years. But, he was not totally independent in managing this endeavor, as in 1823 his father (John Adams) wagered that demand would soar, and increased production as John Quincy watched as prices fell, costing him \$15,000.¹⁷ Although never a successful business, the mill remained in the possession of the Adams' family until about 1872.

In 1824, George's arrangement with Adams to manage the mills was terminated by Adams due to his inability to run them efficiently. In that same year, George once again approached Adams for assistance, soliciting a place as a Clerk in one of the Departments, to which Adams assured him he would "in no case recommend him."¹⁸ George may have continued to reside in the house until his brothers finally sold the estate in 1835. Records show that by 1827, George was working as a clerk at 1st Comptroller's Office in Georgetown.¹⁹ There are no records to indicate another resident at Holt House between George's tenure there and the time it was sold in 1835.

In 1831, Roger Johnson died, leaving the disposal of 13 3/4 acres of Pretty Prospect to his sons, Joseph A. and Charles Johnson, requesting that "the house" and lot of land adjoining the Columbia Mills be sold to cover outstanding debts. It was not until 1835 that they sold the property to Dr. Ashton Alexander, a prominent physician from Baltimore, for whose family Alexandria, Virginia is named. Dr. Alexander never resided in Washington himself, and in 1838, rented the house to Amos Kendall, postmaster general

of the United States, a close confidant of Andrew Jackson, and one of the founders of the modern Democratic Party. Kendall dubbed the house "Jackson Hill" in admiration of his friend, probably much to the chagrin of Jackson's political rival and adjacent property owner, John Quincy Adams.

Amos Kendall must not have been the best of tenants, as in 1841, Dr. Alexander placed an advertisement in the newspaper offering the property for lease or sale, declaring that "it has undergone three years of deterioration by the worst treatment by those who unfortunately tenanted. The proofs of which are grievously visible at a glance. And for the whole three years not a dollar, so far, has been received for damages or rent."

Dr. Henry Holt, a former US Army assistant surgeon from Oswego County, NY, purchased the property in December 1844. Dr. Holt and his family finally sold the property to the Commissioners for the National Zoological Park in 1889 for \$40,000. By the time the Zoo purchased the property in 1889, Holt House was very dilapidated and badly in need of extensive repair. In helping plan the new zoological park, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. advised the park's planners to look to the graceful architecture of Holt House as a source of inspiration. The Zoo renovated the house for use as administrative offices. While the building is once again neglected, its purchase by the Zoo in 1889 probably helped ensure its survival for nearly 200 years.

Endnotes

1. From a personal letter by Mrs. Rebecca Stoddert it is known that the Stodderts owned a mill in the District of Columbia. Since no other mill property has been traced to the Stodderts in DC, it is therefore assumed that Stoddert constructed the Columbia Mills and that the "buildings, improvements" refer to Columbia Mills. District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds, Land Records Liber F6, folio 95-97. Personal letter to Eliza Gantt from Rebecca Stoddert, August 4, 1799. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Personal Papers of Rebecca S. Stoddert.
2. DC Recorder of Deeds, Land Records F6, folio 95-97.
3. Sally Somervell Mackall. *Early Days Of Washington*, 1899.
4. Land Transfer Deed from Walter Mackall to Jonathan Shoemaker. DC Recorder of Deeds, Land Records K10, folio 117-118) also (DC Recorder of Deeds, Land Records W22, folio 112.
5. "Records Relating to Pre-National Zoological Park Purchases." Smithsonian Institution Archival and Historic Preservation Division. Available at: <http://www.si.edu/oahp/holthous/pz1834on.htm>.
6. Land Transfer Deed from Jonathan Shoemaker to Roger Johnson. DC Recorder of Deeds, Land Records W22, folio 109-111.
7. James Dunlop Papers. Record Book 1809-1919. Maryland Historic Society. MS 316.
8. Anna Maria Thornton Diary. July 1820, W. Thornton Papers, Library of Congress's Manuscript Division. Vol. 7.
9. In 1802, Thornton obtains a bond for the purchase of square 348, between 10th and 11th Streets and E Street, NW. Dunlop Family Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
10. Anna Maria Thornton Diary.

11. William Thornton writing on Rober Fulton's patent claims on the steam boat. Records of the Columbia Historical Society. Volume 18. Washington, DC: Columbia Historical Society. 1915, p. 186.
12. Roberta Johns Peter. "The Johnson Family." Maryland Historical Society, n.d.
13. Letter from George Johnson to James Dunlop, Bloomsbury, 21 Dec 1818. Dunlop Papers 1788-1908. Maryland Historical Society.
14. Letter from Roger Johnson to James Dunlop, Bloomsbury, 23 Dec 1818. Dunlop Papers 1788-1908. Maryland Historical Society.
15. Roger Johnson deed transfer to transfer to James Dunlop of the Bank of Columbia. 1818. DC Recorder of Deeds, Land Records AT44, folio 39-42.
16. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Adams Papers, John Quincy Adams Diary.
17. Joseph Wheelan. Mr. Adams: Last Crusade. New York: Public Affairs, 2008. p. 65.
18. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Adams Papers, John Quincy Adams Diary.
19. Washington/ Georgetown City Directory, 1827. Smithsonian Institution, American History Library. Microfiche file for Washington City Directories. No. 1519, p.44

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