

FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 15 – December 2015

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center

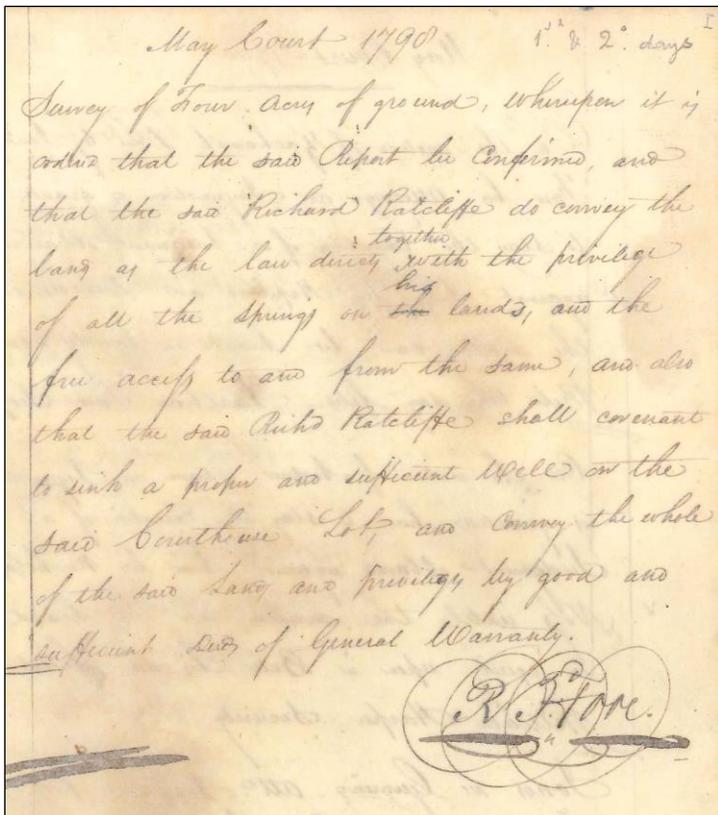


Greetings! In *Found in the Archives*, the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center seeks to highlight interesting and unique documents in our custody.

This month, we will look at the courthouse well that was located next to the 1799 Historic Courthouse, using historic records from our collection and photographs to document how it changed over time.

Public wells were common and important fixtures in small towns in Virginia in the 18th and 19th centuries. Here at Fairfax Courthouse, a public well would have been used as the main water supply for court staff, the jailor and the prisoners housed in the jail behind the courthouse, as well as for visitors to the courthouse.

In 1798, Richard Ratcliffe deeded four acres to the county for a “public lot,” which was to include the courthouse, jail, and clerk’s office.¹ One of the first “necessities” installed on the lot was a public well. In May 1798, an order was entered in the court minute books to:



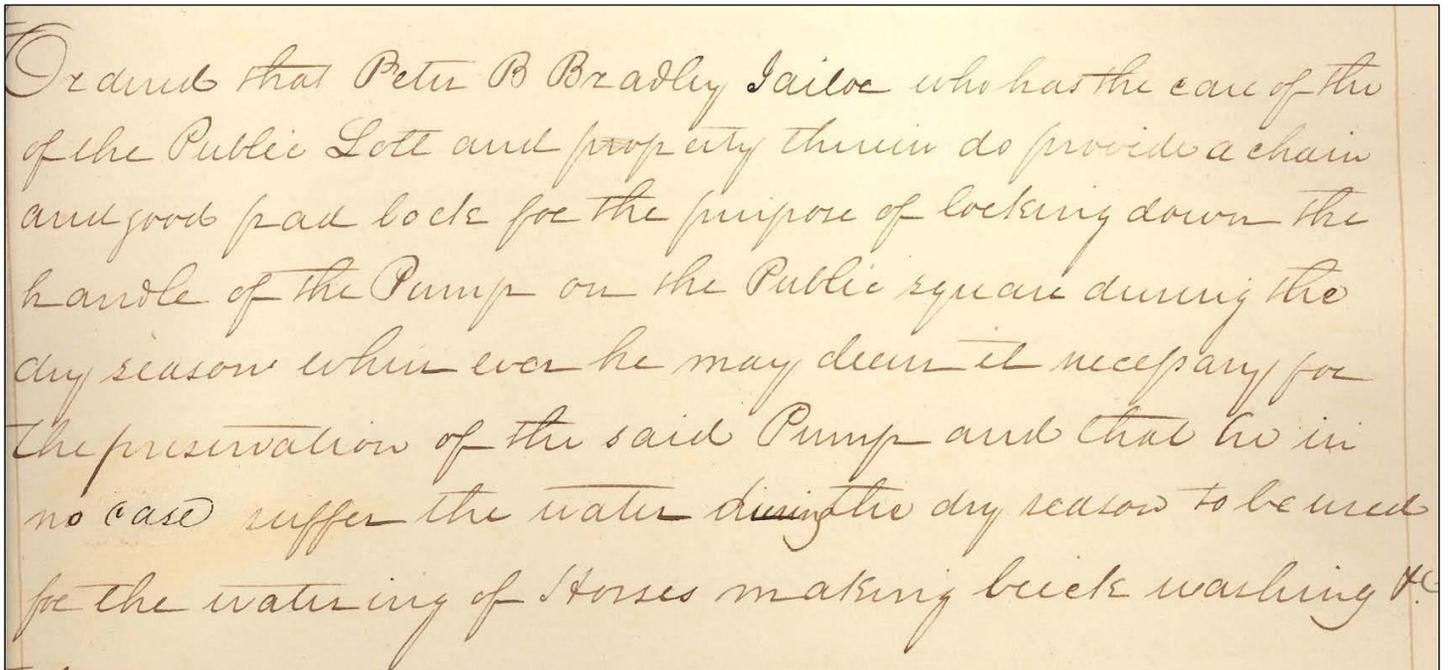
*“Survey of four acres of ground... whereupon it is ordered that... the said Richard Ratcliffe do convey the lands as the law directs together with the privilege of all the springs on his lands, and the free access to and from the same, and also that **the said Richd Ratcliffe shall covenant to sink a proper and sufficient well on the said Courthouse Lot...**”*

Fairfax Minute Book 1797, p. 1 [239], 21 May 1798.

¹ While the original deed was for four acres, in March 1800, an additional order was written to have a re-survey done of the public lot to increase its size to ten acres. Those ten acres now contain the Fairfax Historic Courthouse and the sheriff’s administration building (the 1884 jail).

Unfortunately, while some plats do exist of the 1798-99 courthouse lot, they do not include the location of the first courthouse well sunk by Richard Ratcliffe. We know that the well was indeed sunk, as every few years after 1800 (until about 1822), orders were entered in the minute books to have repairs made to the well.

In 1819, it was ordered that Peter Bradley, county jailor, should place a lock on the well pump when it was not in use, owing to the "dry season":



Ordered that Peter B Bradley Jailor who has the care of the
of the Public Lott and property therein do provide a chain
and good pad lock for the purpose of locking down the
handle of the Pump on the Public square during the
dry season when ever he may deem it necessary for
the preservation of the said Pump and that he in
no case suffer the water during the dry season to be used
for the watering of Horses making bricks washing &c.

Fairfax Minute Book 1819, page 233, 21 Jun 1820.

“Ordered that Peter B. Bradley, jailor who has the care of the Public Lott and property therein do provide a chain and good pad lock for the purpose of locking down the handle of the pump on the Public square during the dry season when ever he may deem it necessary for the preservation of the said pump and that he in no case suffer the water during the dry season to be used for the watering of horses, making brick, washing, &c.”

This excerpt is interesting not only because it refers to the dry season (and possibly droughts), giving us an idea of the climate in this area during the 1820s, but also that exceptions to the use of the well were made – no watering of horses, brickmaking (bricks were made on the courthouse lot for repairs when needed; also, the Allison family commercial brickyard was located catty-corner to the courthouse), and washing.

Perhaps due to drought, or maybe because the original well dug by Ratcliffe was not deep enough, in 1822, the county ordered the construction of a new well on the courthouse lot. The order reads:

“George W. Blincoe and John Bronough are appointed to contract upon the best terms for the sinking, walling, and finishing of a well upon the Public Lott between the Courthouse and office [Clerk’s Office]...”²

As with the older well, the court enacted restrictions on the use of the well for the court’s purposes. In February 1826, the court ordered that:

“Peter B. Bradley is appointed to contract the necessary repairs to the pump in the centre of the public square... that the said Peter B. Bradley jailor for the time being and his successors do exclude in his discretion all persons from the use of the said pump so as to insure a sufficiency of water for the use of the jail, officers of the Court, the court & those who attend it.”³

Fortunately, the “new” well was photographed a number of times, so we have an idea of where it was located on the public lot. The earliest known photograph of the well dates to June 1863, and it was taken by Timothy H. O’Sullivan, a photographer who traveled with famous American and Civil War-era photographer Matthew Brady.

The photograph depicts the 1799 Historic Courthouse, the well (circled in red), and Union soldiers on horseback around the structure. The photograph was taken from the southwest looking northeast, toward the intersection of Chain Bridge Road and Little River Turnpike (SR 123 and Route 236).



“Fairfax Court House, Va. The Courthouse,” photo by Timothy H. O’Sullivan, June 1863.

Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Notice the man sitting to the right of the well, on the ledge, holding a newspaper or book in his hands.

² *Fairfax Minute Book 1822, p. 75, 19 Aug 1822.*

³ *Fairfax Minute Book 1824, p. 183, 21 Feb 1826.*

Sometime between 1863 and 1928, the well housing changed significantly. The photo below, taken between 1918 and 1920, shows the change in the well house, which now sported a weathervane, a concrete surround, and a wooden well bucket. This photograph was taken from the southeast looking toward the northwest (the rear of the 1799 courthouse can be seen at right of the picture).



“Old Well, Fairfax Court House, Va.,” photographer unknown, ca. 1918-1920.

Courtesy of Lee Hubbard, through the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Does the well house in the photo above look familiar to you? It might, if you’ve been to Sully Historic Site! After the new addition to the courthouse was completed in 1928, the shelter was taken down and held in storage by the county for many years. In the 1960s, the “gazebo,” as the county called it, was moved to Sully Historic Site. You can now see it next to the visitor building, with some minor alterations, where it covers the historic home’s site map and other information for visitors.



It is a great feeling to know that a little piece of the historic courthouse’s history lives on at another historic site in Fairfax County!

A final note – the courthouse well was covered over when the 1928 addition was added to the 1799 courthouse. It is believed that the approximate location of the well is where the front steps to the 1928 courthouse (on the Chain Bridge Road side), are now located.

For more information about the documents you have read about in this newsletter, please contact the Fairfax Historic Records Center at historicalrecords@fairfaxcounty.gov or call 703-246-4168.