

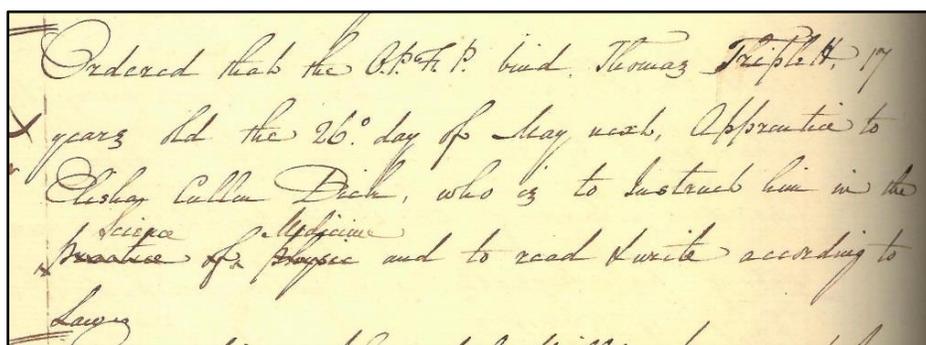
FOUND IN THE ARCHIVES, no. 42 – April 2018
Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



One of the continuing goals at the Historic Records Center is to make our records more accessible to patrons. Among other projects, we have been reprocessing and rehousing different categories of loose documents, and digitizing index cards. While doing this, we have also been able to draw different sources together to make fuller pictures of some of the county's past residents. In this month's *Found in the Archives*, we look at the life of Dr. Thomas Triplett (1776 – 1865).

Thomas Triplett was born in the last days of British rule, on May 26, 1776. His father, also Thomas Triplett, was a one-time neighbor and friend of George Washington, and an entry from one of Washington's diaries suggests that the elder Thomas and his brother William went fox hunting and horse riding with Washington on a number of occasions.¹

During the Revolutionary War, the elder Triplett served as a company captain in Grayson's Regiment, resigning in 1778. He died in 1780, leaving his wife, Sarah Dade Triplett, to raise Thomas and his five sisters. Captain Triplett died intestate (without a will), but an inventory of his real and personal property shows that he left a decently-sized legacy to his wife and children. However, by the time the younger Thomas reached

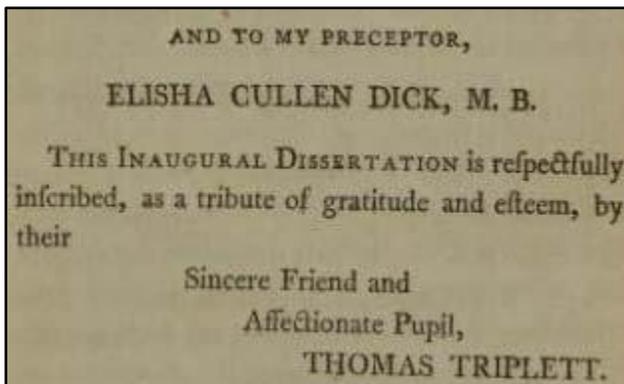


Thomas Triplett apprenticed to Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick, Fairfax Minute Book 1791, p. 180, February 18, 1793

the age of 17 in 1793, his family's fortunes seem to have diminished, as the Overseers of the Poor for Truro Parish apprenticed him to Elisha Cullen Dick to learn a profession – the “Science of Medicine”.

¹ The Triplett brothers and Washington were also members of the Vestry of Truro Parish, as their signatures appear together on an original 1774 pew deed for Pohick Church, housed at the Historic Records Center.

Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick is an interesting man in his own right. Also a friend of George Washington, Dick was one of three doctors called to Washington's bedside in December 1799 as he lay dying. According to letters and reminiscences written by the physicians, Dick called for a tracheotomy as the only means with which to save Washington's life. He was overruled, and sadly, Washington passed away as he struggled to breathe, his throat swelling shut.



[Dedication in *An Inaugural Dissertation on Apoplexy*, Thomas Triplett, 1798](#)

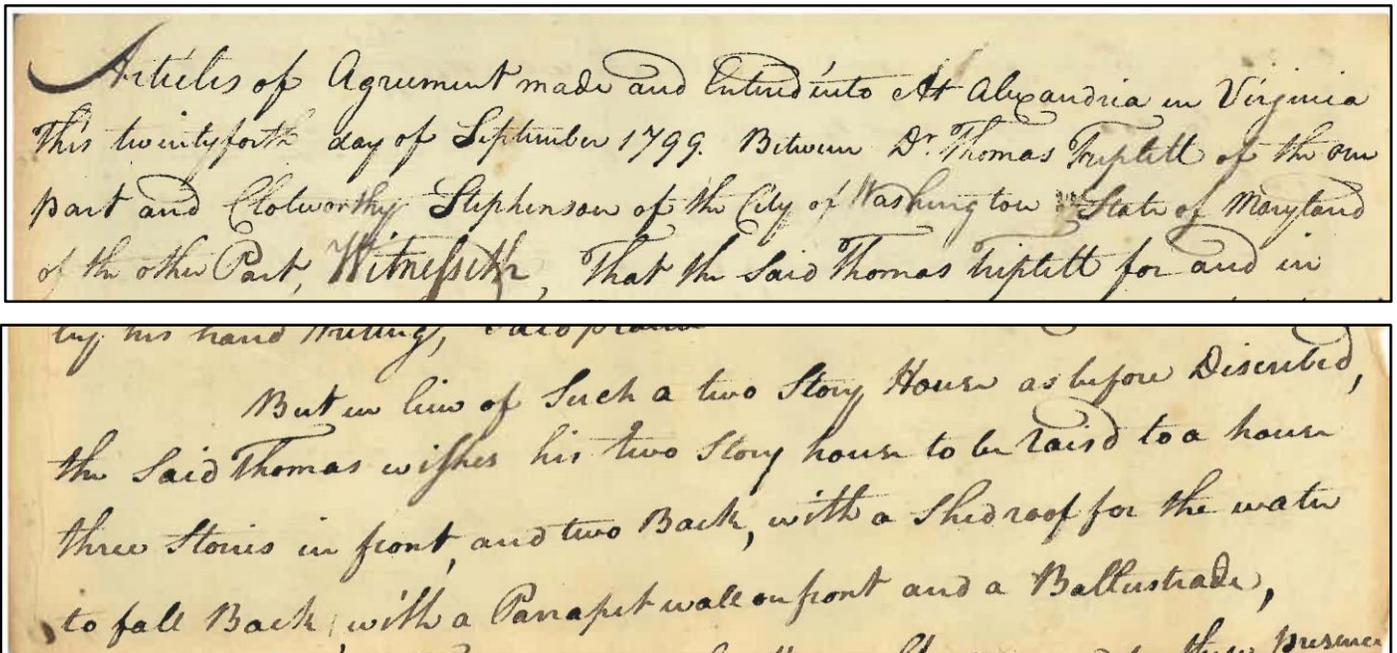
Thomas' apprenticeship with Elisha Dick began a few months before Dick's marriage. Dick's status as newly-married does not seem to have affected the apprenticeship, as Thomas soon gained a place at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, where Dick himself had become a Doctor. In May 1798, Thomas presented his doctoral dissertation, *An Inaugural Dissertation on Apoplexy*, to the Provost, trustees and medical faculty, and

was awarded a "Degree for Doctor of Medicine". He dedicated his dissertation to his professors and to the man to whom he'd spent several years apprenticed, Elisha Dick. His subject, apoplexy, is more commonly known today as a stroke, and Thomas' writings on the subject were regarded as the gold standard of stroke therapy throughout the country in the early 1800s. The publication is available in its entirety on the website *Internet Archive*.

With his medical degree and an honorary membership in the Philadelphia Medical Society, Dr. Thomas Triplett moved to Alexandria and set up his own practice on St. Asaph Street in 1799.

Court records tie Thomas to this area around 1799, and they reflect Thomas's business relationships with Alexandria residents. The agreement shown on the next page indicates that Thomas had been renting a house on Prince Street from Richard Ratcliff[e]. He liked it so much that he wanted his own house constructed in the same style. To achieve this, Thomas did a land swap with a man named Clotworthy Stephenson – Thomas received a lot on Prince Street and Stephenson received a much larger tract of land north of Pohick Creek known as "Barnaby". To make the bargain

more fair, Stephenson was also obliged to construct Thomas' two-story house. This agreement appears to be a second version, as it further states that Thomas had changed his mind and wanted a three-story house with other additions. According to the agreement, Stephenson's responsibility ended when the original two stories were complete, and Thomas was to pay extra for the additions.

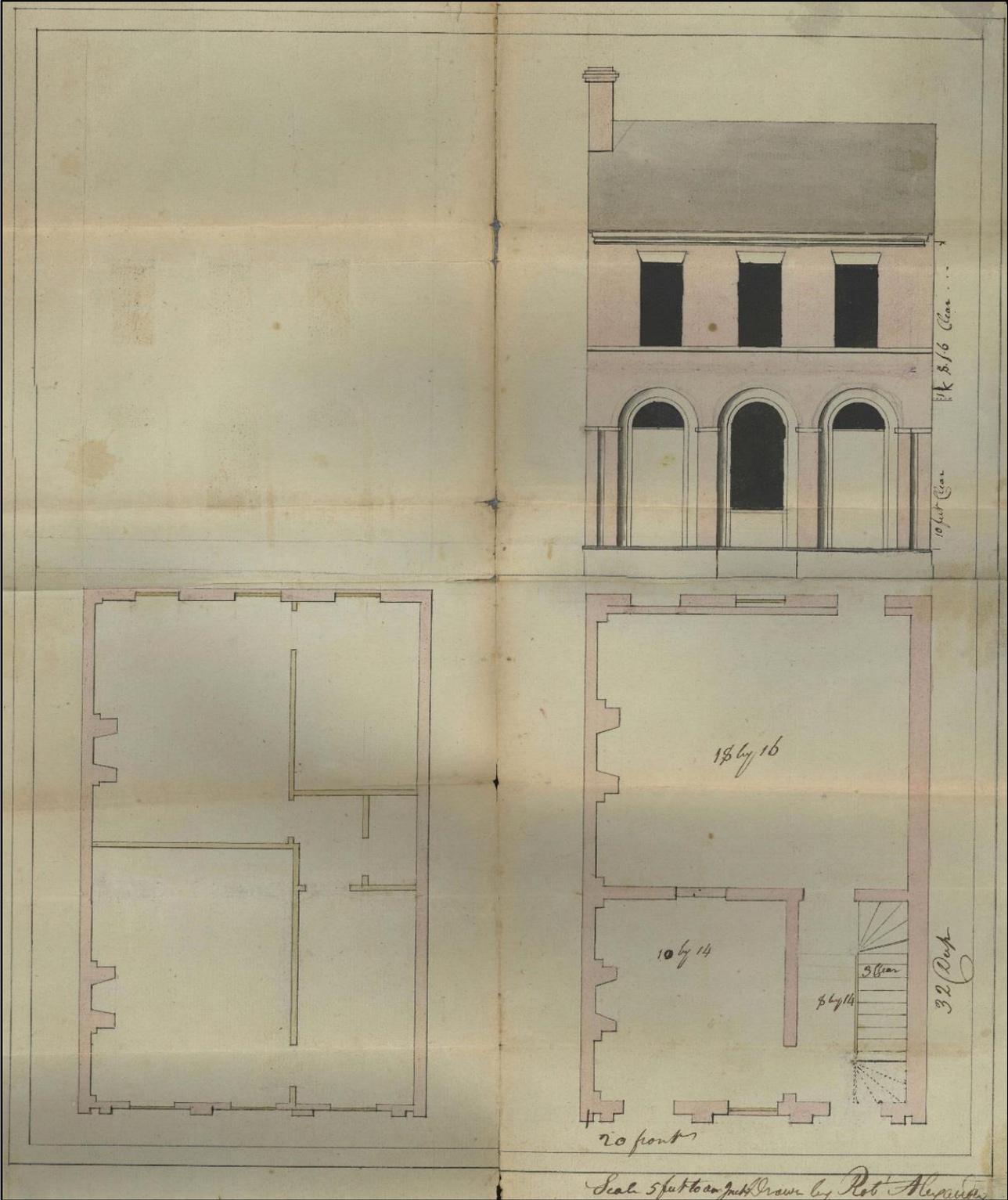


Excerpts from an Agreement between Thomas Triplett & Clotworthy Stephenson, Drawer X, X-1-1268, September 24, 1799

The agreement above partially describes how the house should appear:

... the said Thomas wishes his two story house to be raised to a house three stories in front, and two Back, with a shed roof for the water to fall Back, with a Parapet wall on front and a Ballustrade...

Remarkably, the architect's drawing of the house layout was included with the agreement. It is the only architectural drawing in our collection. The draftsman was Robert Alexander.



Architectural plan for Triplett's house, drawn by Robert Alexander, undated (Drawer X, X-I-1268)

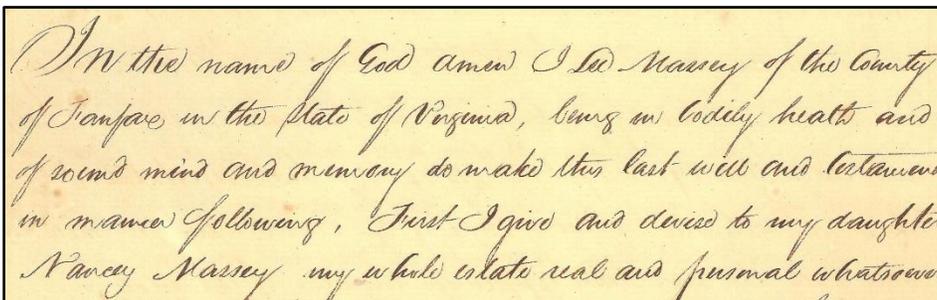
Upon discovery of this architectural drawing, our immediate question was, “Does the house still exist?” After consulting with architectural historians in the City of Alexandria, the consensus is that the house no longer stands, as no house in the area of Duke and Prince Streets currently matches the description put forth in the articles of agreement.

By 1809, Thomas was a man of means. This is attested by a deed of trust recorded in Fairfax Deed Book J-2, made between Thomas and Hazlewood Farish. Farish bought a stagecoach business, including the premises and equipment, for a stagecoach line running from Alexandria to Dumfries from Nathaniel Ellicot, for the large sum of \$4,300. To finance the promissory notes that he wrote, Farish took out a deed of trust with Thomas. If Farish had defaulted in his payments, Thomas could have sold the business at auction, but he would have been liable for any monetary shortfall. Without his own financial security, it is unlikely that Thomas would have assented to being a trustee. Thomas appears as trustee in a number of other deeds of trust between 1816 and 1820.

1810 was a busy year for Thomas, as he married Margaret C. Tebbs in April, moved back to Fairfax County and set up Washington D.C.’s first tuberculosis sanatorium in Georgetown. During the next eight years, he acted as a doctor for the U. S. Navy during the War of 1812, continued to treat victims of tuberculosis, and his family grew with the addition of three children. Unfortunately, Thomas’s own wife contracted tuberculosis during this period, and in 1818, he moved his family to the countryside in Rectortown, Fauquier County, to help Margaret recover. Sadly, even with the move to the country, Margaret passed away in 1824.

Thomas remarried the next year. Ann Massey, affectionately called Nancy by her father, was the daughter of Reverend Lee Massey and Elizabeth Bronaugh. Her father’s sole

heir, Ann also inherited a large number of slaves and land from her uncle, Martin Cockburn.²



Above: Lee Massey’s will, Fairfax Will Book K-1, p. 232, December 20, 1812

² Lee Massey had been the Rector of Pohick Church, where the Triplets and Cockburns were members of the congregation, from 1765-1777. Martin Cockburn was also a very prominent citizen of Fairfax County, serving in a number of public roles.

same as follows: Give and bequeath unto Ann Mafsey the following slaves to wit: Ann, Hagan, Grace, Nell, Nace, John, Nathan, Eliza, Amanda, Katy, Bajey, Young Hagan, Sall, Sally, Tony, Henry with the Woman's future increase for her sole use & behoof and her heirs forever Give and bequeath unto Ann Mafsey all my tract of land situated lying being on Pollock creek in the

Thomas seems to have been very conscious of protecting his wife's interests, and he took out a deed of trust (Fairfax Deed Book A-3, p. 248) to ensure that Ann's inherited property – slaves – would remain for her use only, during her lifetime.

Martin Cockburn's will, Fairfax Will Book L-1, p. 403, July 17, 1818

While Thomas' wife Ann (Nancy) had a dower in slaves for her life, we have little evidence to show that Thomas was a slave owner, except for a deed of manumission recorded in Fairfax County Court in 1799.

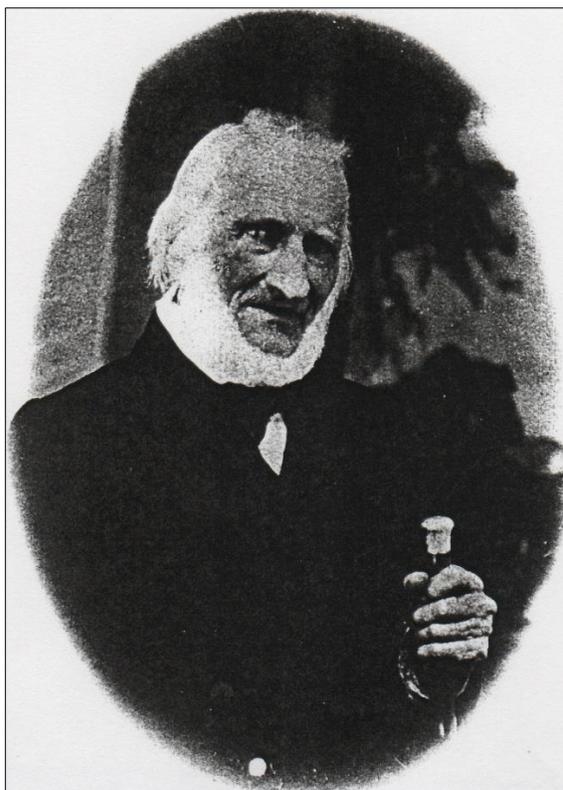
To all to whom these presents shall come - be it known that I Doctor Thomas Triplett of the Town of Alexandria, in the State of Virginia, for good causes and considerations me thereunto moving, have emancipated and set from me and my heirs and from the blame of all persons whatsoever, a negro man called and known by the name, Casar, aged about thirty years middle sized, & marked in the face, on each cheek as Africans frequently are - declaring him the said Casar, for ever hereafter free, and at liberty to dispose of himself as he may chuse -

Deed of Manumission, Thomas Triplett to Casar, Fairfax Deed Book B-2, p. 245, August 22, 1799

In the Deed of Manumission excerpted above, "Doctor Thomas Triplett of Alexandria" emancipated a 30 year-old man named Casar. The deed describes Casar as "marked in the face, on each cheek as Africans frequently are." This is a strong indication that Casar had been brought to the Virginia colony directly from Africa.

Interestingly, Thomas's father, who had died in 1780, had owned a slave named Cesar, valued at £2600, according to his inventory. We have no record of the sale or distribution of the senior Thomas' property, so we can only speculate as to whether Casar/Cesar were indeed the same individual.

After Thomas and Ann's marriage, records concerning Thomas disappear from Fairfax County, and he seems to have concentrated his life in Fauquier County. Thomas continued to practice medicine, and, at one point, was the postmaster for Rectortown. After his wife Ann died in 1848, Thomas moved in with his daughter and her family. Thomas lived a long life and died on Christmas Eve, 1865.



Dr. Thomas Triplett, ca. 1850s - 1865

Courtesy of Kathryn Waggoner Wallis

For more information on these and other records held at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov.

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<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/historic-records-center>