

John Barnes (1730–1826)

Christ Church founder John Barnes was an initial subscriber in 1817 (10 shares for \$250). He was not on the Committee of Eight, one of the 26 committed to purchase a pew or a Vestryman. He in fact rented a pew (Number 56) starting in 1819. At the age of 87, he was by far the oldest of the church's founders. He also was a philanthropist, friend of the poor and confidante of and business adviser to Thomas Jefferson.

Barnes was a native of Norwich, England, where he was born in 1730. At the age of thirty, in about 1760, at the height of the French and Indian War, he came to America, settling first in New York. His occupation in New York is uncertain, but he may have been a merchant. By the time of the Revolution, he was sympathetic to the American cause. He possibly might be the John Barnes who served as a Captain in the New York Rangers. Records at the time show him at North River in upstate New York, where he remained until New York City was evacuated by the British.

When the U.S. government convened in Philadelphia, Barnes moved there from New York. He became friends with Secretary of State Jefferson. According to the newspapers of the day, Barnes was among those who accompanied the heads of the departments when the federal government moved from Philadelphia to Washington. He took up residence in Georgetown. He "lived in princely style among the gentry of that period. Statesmen, dignified and influential, gathered around his board and 'forgot the thorns of public controversy under the roses of private cheerfulness.'"

At some point beginning around 1800 when both he and Jefferson were in Washington Barnes began to act as a sort of commission merchant/purchasing agent/investment adviser for the President. Typical of their extensive correspon-

dence over many years is the following letter from Barnes to Jefferson which exhibits a certain frenetic financial legerdemain:

George Town, Potomac 28th. Augst:
1800

Sir

I had the pleasure addressing you 22d—Inst. since when, have been inabled to state—what I presume to be, the Nt Balce.—on your, & Mr Randolphi 4th: Instal[mt.] becoming payable 18th Next Mo, say \$193.51 as a/c Annexed and should, your Occasional drafts, exceed that Amot:—do not, I pray you, hesitate in drawing them—Allowing me, time suitable, to the immediate Occasion—Your 1st: Octo. Compensation is drawing Near: Moreover I shall soon be inabled to get discounted. at Bank penna.1 Mr Liepers last, \$1000. Note payable 18th Novr:—P.Ms: \$567.10 not noticed in this a/c I have Ordered—Mr Richards. to purchase—a sett of Bills ex. on best terms in the Name of, and transmit, to Messrs: VS. & Hubbards Amsterdam—whom I shall address same conveyance directing it. to be passed to the Credit of said P.M. accordingly—your draft, in favr of S.T. Mason have not yet made its Appearance? I am now got nearly settled—a Neat little two story house, 2 rooms on a floor—within 6 Minutes walk of my Store—garden & Cow house &ca &ca. better calculated, however, for the present season than Winter—under the Care—of Mrs Ratcliff, & Negro Girl, and for my Store—I would not—wish—a Better—Roomy—& compleatly shelved: Count-



ing Room, with a fire place & small Bed room adjoining. for the Young Man who Assists me in tending it, and withal—a Compleat Cellar under the whole, sufficiently large to contain thirty or forty pipes & qr Casks Liqrs—Wine—Brandy &c—with which, I am induced to store it, against the Approaching meeting of Congress-GK \$4,500 WS. \$1500 & JB. \$800—8 Ct Stock—in 5 Certificates—have already issued. recd, & transferred to the Treasury Books City of Washington Mr Simpson—I find, notwithstanding: I gave him particular direction, to issue the two former in their respective Names have Nevertheless made the whole of them—in Mine Only—can be transferred again—at leisure please favr me with your Usual letter—to Mr Steele—.

with great Esteem, I am sir—your mst Obedt: &c

JOHN BARNES

On May 6, 1806, President Jefferson appointed Barnes Collector of Customs at the port of Georgetown, a lucrative position he filled for nearly 20 years until his death.

That Jefferson appreciated Barnes's usefulness and reciprocated Barnes's cordiality is attested in a letter to Barnes, then in Philadelphia, written from Monticello on June 29, 1811:

If you could recommend any merchant there who would purchase for me on commission as faithfully and kindly as you used to do, it would be a valuable service to me, as soon as I am in a state to avail myself of it.

In the same letter he expresses sympathy for Barnes' increasing feebleness and wishes him a speedy return to health:

I wish you had thought a visit to Monticello as friendly to your views of health as Philadelphia. I am persuaded it would have been as much so, and been received with more welcome in our tranquil seclusion than the bustle and distraction of a great town will admit. Try it the next experiment you make with the same view and follow afterward the course which shall have proved itself most favorable and accept in the meantime my prayers for a longer continuance of the blessings of strength, health and happiness.

In 1815 when Jefferson sold his library to the Library of Congress in order to discharge his debts the second largest beneficiary at \$4,870 was John Barnes of Georgetown.

Years later, Barnes named Jefferson in his will and bequeathed him two highly personal items:

Lastly suffer me to add to my wishes that my Likeness, set in a gold frame, taken in 1820 by Mr. [Joseph] Wood of Philadelphia, together with a print of the late General Kosciusko, in a black frame, may be respectfully presented to Thomas Jefferson at his seat Monticello, Virginia, presuming they would be acceptable, and add to his numerous Gallery Collection, as a token of grateful remembrance for the many favors received and confidences reposed in me for more than twenty-five years agency in conducting his own private funds, as well as those of his deceased and distinguished and much lamented friend whose memory will be ever dear to this country.

Numerous references in the Jefferson-Barnes correspondence to the financial concerns of



General Kosciusko leave no doubt as to the identity of the friend referred to above. Efforts to locate the portrait of Barnes have proven unfruitful. It does not appear to still be in the Monticello collection.

Barnes died at the age of 96 in 1826. There is a record of a funeral for "John Bonnes" at Christ Church on February 13, 1826. He was buried in the Old Presbyterian burial ground on 33rd Street, there being neither Oak Hill Cemetery nor any Episcopal burial ground at that time (today the Volta Place Park and houses adjacent to it on Q Street occupy the site of the Old Presbyterian burial ground, and it is likely that his body remains interred there).

It was not until some three years later that the Vestry held a Christmas Eve 1829 meeting at which it voted to forfeit Barnes's pew for failure to pay rent. Possibly the church was awaiting some sort of settlement from his estate to pay past rent. If so, it and others were to be disappointed, as discussed below.

The following obituary notice appeared in the *Metropolitan*, a weekly paper published in Georgetown, under date of February 18, 1826:

"John Barnes, Collector of the Port of Georgetown, died in town February 11, 1826, in the 96th year of his age. He was a native of Norwich in England but came to N. Y. prior to the Revolution. When N. Y. was taken by the British he removed up the North River but returned to the city after the restoration of peace. When Congress removed to Philadelphia Mr. Barnes settled in that city and in 1800 removed to Georgetown. After freeing and providing legacies for his slaves, the remainder of his estate was left to build a Poor House and provision was made for the

support of the same."

That the welfare of the poor "was most in his thought and ever in his sight" while living was confirmed in his last will and testament.

After manumitting his slaves Abigail and Nellie Gray and bequeathing to them sufficient bed and bedding, to the former sixty dollars and to the latter forty dollars per annum during their natural lives, he bequeathed \$200 per annum, in wood, meal and clothing, to be distributed "forever" by his executors "at the most convenient season of the year to the poor and necessitous widows and orphans" in Georgetown. He then stated that he wanted to devote "the whole of my estate to charitable purposes" and bequeathed \$1000 for the establishment of a poor house in Georgetown. The baroque language he employed offers an insight into his personality:

It has often occurred to me that the time was not far distant (indeed it has already become urgently necessary) when a poor-house or bettering house for the county or town (it matters not by what denominated) should be established, and if proposed through this honorable and respectable corporation of Georgetown, I doubt not that it would be ultimately successful, and thereby a good foundation would be laid towards perfecting a useful and meritorious work, worthy of the enlightened, benevolent and opulent inhabitants of the District and its vicinity, and the humane at large; of contributing to the comfort and improvement of the suffering objects of such institutions.

Whenever any progressive proceedings towards such an end become certain and conclusive, a sum not exceeding one thousand dollars, as occasional-



ly wanted and demanded, I freely bequeath towards its establishment....

Then Barnes made a big mistake. He explicitly writes out of his will his two great granddaughters who were his natural heirs. He did it at least in part out of pique because they would not come to Washington so that he could oversee their education.

As it turned out, it was not discovered until Barnes died that Georgetown had no charter to build a poor house. An application was made to Congress and authority was given by an act of May 20, 1826. Georgetown thereupon enacted an ordinance on December 20, 1826, which provided that “James S. Morsell, John Little, John Baker, William G. Ridgely, Daniel Buzzard, John McDaniel, Charles A. Burnett, and Gideon Davis, with the mayor of the town as their president, shall constitute a board of trustees for the poor of Georgetown until the first Monday in January, 1828, and until their successors be appointed.” Note that three of the Board (Morsell, Ridgeley, and Burnett) were members of Christ Church.

However, Barnes’s estate proved insufficient to support the bequest, and his house was subject to a ground rent so heavy that it could not sell.

On December 6, 1827, the two great granddaughters sued, alleging that they were John Barnes’s sole surviving descendants, heirs-at-law, and only legal representatives; that the bequest for a poor house was void for uncertainty; that no steps had been taken to induce any reasonable belief that a poor house would be undertaken and brought to a successful result by any person of the corporation; and that the money should be paid to them unless steps be taken in a reasonable time to erect and maintain such an institution. The great granddaughters won, and were entirely successful in having all the charita-

ble bequests of the will declared null and void by the court.

However, tradition says that an appeal was taken and the suit finally settled by compromise, with the heirs agreeing to pay to the mayor of Georgetown \$4,000 in stock of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank in Georgetown (this is unproven, and the sum makes little sense in light of the \$1000 amount of the original bequest). In any event, in 1830 the town of Georgetown allocated the funds and eventually purchased lots for a poor house and laid the cornerstone the following year. It was located just east of what is now the Guy Mason Recreation Center in Glover Park. Produce was grown on the premises to supply an average of thirty inmates, and the surplus was sold in the Georgetown market to help defray operating costs (it turned out to be a money pit, much to the chagrin of the Georgetown Corporation). A work house to which vagrants and other petty criminals were sent was attached. When Georgetown was incorporated into the City of Washington in 1885, the residents of the Georgetown poor house were removed to one near the Anacostia River.¹

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge “John Barnes, A Forgotten Philanthropist of Georgetown” by Cordelia Jackson (February 9, 1903).

