

Washington DC could have been Heartburn

By Georgia Lambert

It could have happened. The capital of our nation, named for George Washington, might have been named for George Hertburn, had not a Norman knight from the 1180s traded lands with the Bishop of Durham.

Some 800 years ago, William Hertburn (pronounced heart bum) settled in a green and peaceful English village, about five miles west of Sunderland, in Tyne and Wear. The Bishop of Durham at the time, Hugh le Puiset, wished to add Hertburn's previous property to his own in Stockton on Trees. After the exchange, Hertburn moved his residence, and according to custom, changed his name to reflect his new establishment, becoming William de Wessynton. The name was taken from the old Saxon words Hwaes, or chief; Inga, 'from the family of; and Tun, or estate. Roughly translated: "The estate of the local chief's family." William built Washington Old Hall, the ancestral seat of the Wessynton or Washington family.

In 1182, William married Margaret, the sister of the King of Scotland, William the Lion. This connection may shed light on the fact that the crown of kingship and sovereignty over the new America, when declined by the ageing Bonnie Prince Charlie, was offered to General George Washington, who--Cincinnatus-like--also declined. With the royal connection, the family remained in high standing, and in 1304, Edward I visited the Washingtons on his return to Scotland.

Sometime before 1346, the family registered its new coat of arms. On a white or silver field called argent are two horizontal red or gules bars called 'bar gemel.'

In the Hebrew alphabet, gemel or gimel, the equivalent of the English "G", represents development, or the process by which any initial spark of creativity must be properly guided until flowering into physical reality. Gimel also instructs that two opposing forces must be blended to form a third, more complete and perfect entity. From the Oneness of the Hebrew aleph or 'A' and the duality of beth or 'B' comes the synthesis known as gimel.

Along with the bar gemel are three red (gules) five-pointed stars. These stars are specifically Scottish stars called 'mullets.' This comes from 'malette,' which is the rowel of a spur. The five-pointed star also stands for MAN and symbolizes the perfected personality. The red 'stars and bars' on the white field may echo the alchemical blending of opposites alluded to by the 'gimel.'

Above the shield, the white or argent of the Royal Family, is a helmet surmounted by a ducal coronet. The helm indicates at least a gentleman or esquire, and if it is of silver instead of steel, it indicates a peer. On either side of the helm fans a mantling of red and white, and above the ducal coronet, which is no longer granted but can be found in older grants and conformations, is a black or sable eagle. The eagle, a royal symbol since the Romans, is shown rising, beak closed and peaceful, and lifting to the west with wings addorsed and inverted.

The motto below reads EXITUS, ACTA, PROBAT. 'EXITUS' translates as departure or egress, to go out from action, also the final fate or future--the results arising from action. ACTA translates as the seashore, seaside pleasure or party. PROBAT could be PROBATUS, regarded with approval or esteem, or PROBATION, the approval of something after scrutiny or inspect. If it is PROBATA, it means sheep. Taken in the mid-1300s this motto seems prophetic, perhaps indicating the departure by sea, and future results arising from action by the family in the New World. This coat of arms can still be seen today, hanging in front of the Washington Arms Inn, a pub near the Old Hall.

After 1399, the senior branch of the family moved to Westmorland, Lancashire, and Northampton, although many generations stayed behind in the Old Hall manor. In 1657, John Washington, the great-grandfather of George, emigrated to America.

A restoration of Old Hall was completed in 1955, and the building and grounds were given to the National Trust a year later. President Jimmy Carter visited Old Hall in 1977. He has been the only American president to do so. The manor is now open to the visiting public. Only about 20% of the six thousand visitors per year are Americans, one reason being that Old Hall is not mentioned in most encyclopedias.

Mentioned or not, however, perhaps the ancient family name of 'Hertburn' describes more accurately the activity in our capital city, than does the designation,

'The estate of the local chief's family!'

Come to think of it, the estate of the local chief is usually one of heartburn. Another alchemical synthesis.

Sources:

1. Washington Old Hall/by Bruce Tober British Heritage Magazine, December/January 1998/1999 pp 27-31
2. A Complete Guide to Heraldry by Arthur Charles Fox-Davies 1978 Edition, Crown Publishers, pp 119-20, 234-6, 295-6, 319, 372-3
3. The Hebrew Alphabet by Edward Hoffman, 1998 Chronicle Books, pp 27-8