

Letter of John Joyce to his Uncle, Rev. Robert Dickson

The following brief with excerpt of a letter from John Joyce dated "Caroline County, Portobago Bay on Rappahannock River, Virginia, 24<sup>th</sup> March 1785", to his uncle Rev. Robert Dickson, Narrow Water near Newry, Ireland, is from the original in the manuscript collection of the Virginia Historical Society. A copy of it was published in the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography for October, 1915 (Vol. 25, No. 4; pages 407-14), with editorial footnote stating that the letter was given to the Society by the eminent lawyer, Hon. Wm. Green, of Richmond, at the request of Governor John Letcher (1860-1864), who was understood to have said that it had been found in Norfolk during the War of 1812. It seemed probable that the author of the letter may have been employed at the time as a tutor at "Portobago", the plantation home of Thomas Lomax (1746-1811).

In view of the account given in the Dickson Letters of the way in which those letters from William Dickson of Duplin to his cousin Rev. Robert Dickson, of Ireland, were preserved, it would seem likely at least that this one had also been brought to this country by the sons of Robert Dickson as a means of identification to friends and relatives here whom they had never seen. But if such was the case one wonders how it got to Norfolk and for whom it was intended as an introduction. Nothing further is known of the John Joyce who wrote it, but it may have been intended for him or delivered to one of his family. The letter begins:

Dr. Uncle,

As I have written you in a former Letter of the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of my present situation, I shall say nothing more respecting that in this one, only that I am well and as happy as any one could be in the like Circumstances. I shall now proceed to give you an imperfect Description of this Country, as far as my Knowledge [torn] or information and thime of Residence will Admit of.

Norfolk, which was the first place I went on Shore at, had been an Elegant, large town before it was destroyed, chiefly Built of Brick, but now rebuilding mostly with wood...which he accounts for by the fact that landowners were holding the better business lots for high prices and leasing them for a period of seven years Ground Rent, so that

merchants would build only temporary structures in view of their short lease of the land. Not only was land high in Norfolk, but labor was also high and in great demand. "Carpenters and Brick-Layers are much wanted in all the Towns, they had in Norfolk L5 Pr Month and Work bounded them through the year, and after 30s p. Week for Jobbs of short standing – but indeed Workmen of all Denominations have most enormous prices for their Work. You have to pay from 18s to 25s for making a Suit of Clothes". Prices were high and trade was good. It was his opinion that Norfolk was destined to be an important Port and trade city. One need he pointed out was for a "discenting Clergyman". He had been told by one of the merchants that they would subscribe 100 to 150 Guineas to a "genteel well behave Man".

Joyce says the inhabitants of Norfolk before the war were mostly Scotchment; since then other Scots had replaces them. And he continues:

"They are very fond of Irish Emigation here, and it is Given as a Toast often at their Tables, it really surprises me to see their inclined to give preference to ye Irish or English, rather than the Soch [Sotch] or French, altho the latter their assistants in the War, notwithstanding they seem to dislike them in General, and if there was a Bargain in any of their Merchandize w'd rather that an Englishman should have it than a Frenchman. –The Benefits arising from the Reformation [Revolution or change of government] I think are not so great as they expected; they themselves confess that they were better before the War than now, that is with respect to Taxes, which are very heavy upon them; yet they don't [appear] to Repent in the least what they have done, I believe they wd {do} the same thing again where [sic] they put to Trial, and much aplaud the Irish for their Resolutions, and Spirit of Independence; but think you have let the time pass when it might have been in your power to have gained it, that is by joining them here while at Variance and England engaged, but they despair of your gaining it now.

.....  
They don't expect that the Benefits of Reformation will be of much service to the present Generation, but that it will reach to their posterity, & that they perhaps are not paying as much as what England would have impos'd upon them – and after some [years] they expect to be better – People of any property suffer'd in general

exceedingly, many of them from Wealth & affluence almost to Beggary – Their Taxes seem to be increasing and lie very heavy upon Men of property, Besides their Land Tax everything they have are Tax'd ad Valorem, every Negro /Slave from 16 [years of age] Tax'd 20s, & 10s for children from the Minute they are Born, which amounts to a very great Sum to such as have 150 to 200 slaves such as Mr. Lomaxes, his Taxes amount to L350 add per Annum – Cattle and all other things are taxed in proportion."

Before giving a description of the country generally, Joyce very modestly says:

"What account I have given you is far from being a full or per feet one & it is only the outline of my own observation & Conversation with others, or to say even could I describe it fully w'd be giving an acct of America as I have heard some attributing the description of one part or in one Letter as the Description of America in general, which is entirely foolish, for this lace and Ireland do not more widely differ in their ways & manner of [torn] than this to other arts of America."

Joyce describes the deep rich soil along the rivers, well suited for growing tobacco; that farther back being best for Indian Corn, the bread of which was largely used by the lower classes; then the more hilly back country with peach trees from which excellent brandy was a plentiful product. Cotton was the chief manufacture, with little woolen or linen. Most of the men as well as all of the Women of Lower Classes Wear Cotton Cloth of their own manufacture both summer & winter, which grows here in abundance." He found good English breads of horses. "The weather here is very variable particularly in spring and fall, in the mornings and evenings, you're like to freeze and in the middle of the day it is almost burning the soals of ones shoes..." Land was abundant in the country, but:

"There being no Tennants, the mode they have is this, they have an overseer or overseers & their slaves Clear and plant Tobacco, Indian Corn, Wheat & sometimes Cotton. Few Oats are used here & what they have make use of it to feed their Cattle for they would not eat it."

Tobacco was sold to local merchants or exchanged for other needed commodities; Indian Corn to traders from Pennsylvania, New England, "the Gersies" and part of Maryland who came "in little Vessels fitted for the purpose up the Navigable Rivers with such Commodities as they could want, and Take Corn in Exchange; for they raise no Indian Corn in the above mentioned places – therefore for 100b that an Estate would bring in by this mode, could they have it rented would bring b10000. They are very indifferent Labourers, I think they never Cultivate any Ground as it [should be] it must be very superior to our Land, for with any kind of Cultivation it will carry where I am 5 and 6 Crops of Wheat and Tobacco...So I think a man that understood Farming ought [to] make Very handsomely for himself, had he any Capital to begin on so that he would be able to have a parcel Cleared at first, whenever that seems Runout Clear a new piece which is their method here."...

Since the War there is a Land Office Opened, and the Inhabitants since that have explor'd back upwards 500 or 600 miles farther than Before to a new Country Called Kaintucky, which have lowered the purchase of lands here and have made Taxes more severe, as it is reckon'd the finest Country in the World, affording almost all the necessities of life Spontaneously."

From this glowing account of western lands being offered in any quantity at twenty shillings a hundred acres, Joyce turns in closing to comment on a fellow countryman whom his uncle may have written of:

"If Jammey Clouney sets out for America I am really distressed on his [account] considering his family and the smallness of his stock [and can] not imagine what they would do untill they w'd get settled. I assure you there would be a great deal of hardship and Difficulty attending it more than he can have any Idea of. I have an instance or two of it. But I wish every thing for the Best.

I am afraid I have tried your patience with [such] circumstantial accounts I beg D'r Uncle that you..write to me by [?] and inform me of the State of the Nation and that of our Friends. Give my Love to Aunt and all my Relations.

I again Repeat it, Pray write to me. I w'd be glad of advice & Direction how I should conduct myself in which your experience and knowledge of the World has furnished you with.

I am D'r [Uncle] with unfeigned respect and wishes for your Happiness your ever affect. Nephew

John Joyce

The address occupied a center position on the otherwiise blank fourth page of the folded sheet, and read:

Rev'd Robert Dickson  
Narrow Water near  
Newry  
Ireland