

James Monroe and Tench Ringgold: A Friendship Bonded in Service

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Tench Ringgold and his brother Samuel, who was six years older, were probably the closest among the children of Thomas Ringgold who died in 1776, the year Tench was born. It was through Samuel, who married a Philadelphia heiress in 1792, that Tench received training in a Philadelphia mercantile firm that later bolstered his credentials among future employers and creditors. Later Samuel portioned off a section of his 15,000-acre estate in Washington County, Maryland, and gave it to Tench who, like Samuel, became a planter and slaver. While still farming in western Maryland, Tench, a budding entrepreneur, developed business interests in Georgetown's thriving port, and married the daughter of former Maryland governor, Thomas Sim Lee, who lived in Georgetown at the end of the eighteenth century and built a substantial family house that is still standing on M Street (corner of 30th).

After Samuel's first wife died in 1811 and Samuel had been elected a congressman from western Maryland to the U.S. House of Representatives, he married in 1813 Antoinette Hay, the daughter of George Hay, a well-known Virginia lawyer, judge and friend of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe – and, later, Tench Ringgold. When Hay's first wife died, Hay married in 1808 the daughter of James Monroe, then secretary of state under President Madison. In this way, both Samuel and his brother Tench became part of Monroe's extended family circle.¹

Over the years, Tench benefited greatly from Monroe's patronage, and they became close friends, culminating in Tench's presence at Monroe's deathbed on July 4, 1831, the fifty-fifth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Samuel Ringgold had married his new bride during the War of 1812. When the British marched into Washington on August 24, 1814, Tench Ringgold had begun the day with a group of local militia,² but when they fell back, he encountered Monroe on his way out of town as



British Burn the Capitol – Mural by Allyn Cox,
House Wing of the U.S. Capitol Building.³

Washington was burning (including Ringgold's own ropewalk). They proceeded to the Virginia countryside, accompanying Madison to a safe house in Fairfax County.⁴



James Monroe by John Vanderlyn (1816).
Image: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

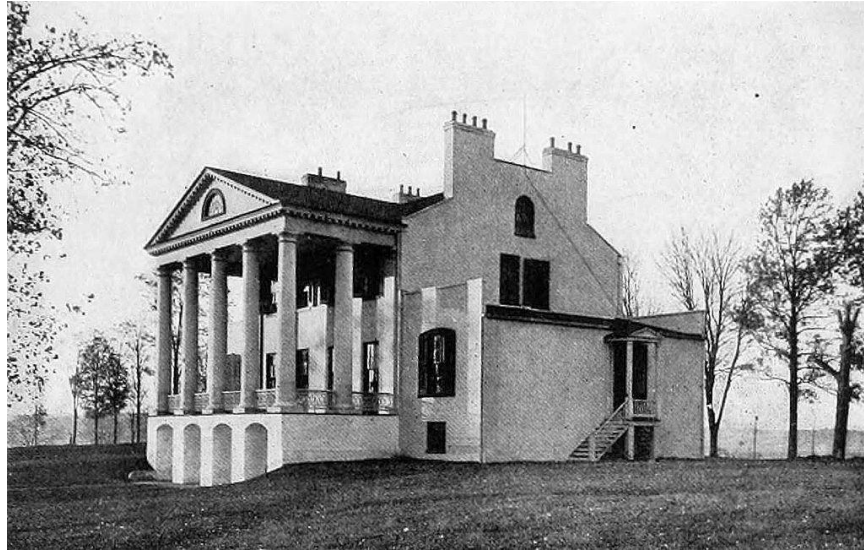
Monroe subsequently appointed Ringgold head of a bureau in the War Department that handled finances. He had been secretary of state, but Madison, appreciating Monroe's energy and recognizing it was needed in these fraught days, appointed him secretary of war in the aftermath of the capital's destruction.⁵ Ringgold's acquaintance with bankers and moneymen, whom he had so often lobbied during his various failed enterprises, proved useful, and Monroe said in a letter written in 1830 that he had carried out his duties "with perfect integrity, great industry, and sound judgment."⁶ As a result of his work with Monroe, Ringgold was appointed in 1815 by President Madison as one of three commissioners to supervise the rebuilding of government buildings in Washington. This appointment lasted a year, and in 1817 Ringgold was once again looking for a position with the government.

He had heard that the position of marshal of the District of Columbia was being vacated, and he applied for it in a letter to Madison in the last days of his presidency. Ringgold saw to it that a sheaf of letters from Washington's leading citizens recommended him for the job also reached the president's desk.⁷ With Monroe in office he was appointed marshal, and kept the position for an extraordinarily long time, until 1831. He was responsible for organizing Monroe's second inauguration and was often a visitor to the White House. On one occasion, when John Quincy Adams was dining with Monroe, Ringgold dined with them and Monroe's two daughters.⁸

In the last year of his presidency, Monroe invited General Lafayette to make a grand tour of the United States marking fifty years after the Declaration of Independence. Lafayette arrived in August in New York, went first to New England, then then wound his way south to Washington by October. Ringgold, as marshal, had an official role to play of introducing

“America’s Guest” to President Monroe – who knew, of course, Lafayette from his years in France as a diplomat. Ringgold was asked to dine the next day at the White House with the general and other notables from Congress and the region.

Following the tour of the states that then comprised the United States, Lafayette returned to Washington in 1825. In August, Ringgold accompanied the general and his entourage



Oak Hill, Loudoun County, home of James Monroe. Image dated 1915: Wikipedia.

including his son and secretary) and President John Quincy Adams on a visit to Oak Hill, the estate in Loudoun County that Monroe and his wife retired to after his second term ended.⁹ It was probably not the first visit; Ringgold went out more than several times to Oak Hill to see Monroe, on at least one occasion with his son, Ben Ringgold.¹⁰ The visits were reciprocated, and Monroe and his wife would stay at the Ringgolds when passing through Washington on their way north to visit their daughter in New York City or on their way back to Oak Hill.¹¹

Monroe and Andrew Jackson were at loggerheads over an incident dating from the War of 1812 and Jackson’s need for cash from the government to pay his troops and for arms. Ringgold, who had been working for Monroe during the last year of the war, was also implicated in the dispute. Over the years he sought confirmation of both their roles as a means of resolving the differences between the two men. It culminated in Ringgold’s unsuccessful effort to arrange a dinner between Jackson and Monroe during one of Monroe’s visits to Washington in 1829.¹²

Ringgold and George Hay, the father of his brother’s bride, Antoinette Hay, and Monroe’s in-law, developed a special friendship of their own, and the two families drew close. During the tumultuous year of 1830 – the last, as it turned out, of Ringgold’s tenure as marshal – Ringgold accompanied Hay, who suffered from acute rheumatism, to White Sulphur Springs in June. While he was gone, Hay’s daughter Eliza, then staying at Oak Hill, traveled to Washington to tend to Ringgold’s sick children. In September, when Ringgold and Hay were returning from White Sulphur Springs to Oak Hill, Hay became violently ill; Eliza was summoned back to Oak Hill, but she arrived too late: Hay died on September 21.¹³ Another calamity happened two days later, when Mrs. Monroe died on September 23, 1830.

Monroe was greatly dispirited after her death, and he left Oak Hill and went to New York to be looked after by his daughter Maria. From there he wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Treasury Samuel T. Ingham in which he praised the honesty, integrity and hard work of Ringgold when he served in the War Department in the aftermath of the burning of Washington

in 1814. It would appear that Ringgold had already got wind of the fact that President Jackson would not renew his appointment as marshal at the end of January 1831, and Monroe sought to persuade Ingham to dissuade Jackson from doing so. As Monroe expressed in his letter, “I feel a deep interest in the welfare of Mr. Ringgold, and in his re-appointment to his present office, on which his own, and that of his family, essentially depends.”¹⁴ In any event, the effort failed, and Ringgold was not reappointed for fourth term as marshal.

Out of a job and with a family of seven children and an enslaved labor force of thirteen Blacks to support, Ringgold searched for alternatives. He developed the idea of becoming a “General Agent” for people and businessmen who needed help getting their contracts through and then honored by the complicated government bureaucracy – a prototype of the modern lobbyist. But before he could launch his new business, he was informed that Monroe was in grave ill health. He dropped everything and went to New York to tend to the former president. He even offered to take Monroe, who was weakened by his illness, in a litter if needed back to Oak Hill.¹⁵

Ringgold wrote about this time:

“I have been his constant attendant & nurse, since the first of May, with the exception of one week; during all May & part of June, he had chills & fever every day, they were however subdued early in June, but the disturbing cough, by which he has been tormented for many years, and which was the cause of his death was too obstinate & deeply seated on his lungs to be removed by human skill. On Friday the 1st of July it became evident that speedy dissolution was at hand, and he died . . . at 1/2 past three o’clock on Monday without a struggle and resigned to his fate in the most perfect possession of his mental faculties.”¹⁶

Monroe died July 4, 1831, the fifth anniversary of the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, both of whom died on July 4th, 1826. Ringgold carried out a last request from Monroe regarding the freeing of his slave Peter Mark.¹⁷ Thus ended a long, worthy, and affectionate friendship between the two men, and a mainstay in Ringgold’s life.



LAST RESIDENCE OF PRESIDENT MONROE, PRINCE STREET, NEW YORK.

The house on Prince Street in Manhattan where Monroe died when Ringgold was at his bedside.¹⁸

¹ *National Intelligencer*, February 18, 1813, p. 1. The claim they were married in the White House cannot be verified. They were married by the Rev. Andrew T. McCormick who was the minister of the first Episcopal church in Washington, Christ Church Parish, which in 1807 was rebuilt near the Navy Yard. On the church history Robert Brooks Ennis, "Christ Church, Washington Parish," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, Washington, D.C., 69/70, 1969, 126–177.

² All eligible men in Washington were required to sign up with one of the local militias.

³ Image from: <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/cox-corridors-murals>.

⁴ Tim McGrath, *James Monroe, a Life* (Dutton, 2020), 340–41; David Turk, "Firebrand: U.S. Marshal Tench Ringgold and Early American Politics," <https://dcchs.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/RinggoldArticle.pdf>.

⁵ Various pieces of the correspondence between Monroe and Ringgold at this time, 1814–15 are preserved in the Library of Congress James Monroe Papers: for example, Tench Ringgold to James Madison, February 16, 1815.

⁶ See the source in footnote 14 below.

⁷ The letter writers are listed in the Index of the Library of Congress James Monroe Papers.

⁸ John Quincy Adams Digital Diary, Massachusetts Historical Society,

<http://www.masshist.org/publications/jqadiaries/index.php/document/jqadiaries-v32-1822-10-20-p385#sn=4>
JQA Digital Library, entry for October 20, 1822.

⁹ <http://www.masshist.org/publications/jqadiaries/index.php/document/jqadiaries-v49-1825-08-06-p891#sn=9>

JQA Digital Library, entry for August 6, 1825; see also Tim McGrath, *James Monroe, A Life* (New York: Penguin/Random House, 2020), 558.

¹⁰ <http://www.masshist.org/publications/jqadiaries/index.php/document/jqadiaries-v37-1827-04-14-p164#sn=16>

JQA Digital Diary, 14 April 1827; other visits to Oak Hill: December 14, 1828:

<http://www.masshist.org/publications/jqadiaries/index.php/document/jqadiaries-v36i-1828-12-14-p065#sn=30>

JQA Digital Diary; September 23, 1829: with his son Ben: George Hay to Lloyd Nicholas Rogers, September 23, 1829: The World of James Monroe, Monroe Family Papers (William and Mary),

<https://digital.libraries.wm.edu/george-hay-oak-hill-loudon-sic-county-virginia-lloyd-nicholas-rogers-baltimore-maryland-1829-0>.

¹¹ <http://www.masshist.org/publications/jqadiaries/index.php/document/jqadiaries-v37-1828-06-01-p560#sn=27>

JQA Digital Diary, entry dated 1 June 1828; see also *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 4, 1828; James Monroe in feted at dinner at the White House on July 1, 1828, with Ringgold among the dinner guests: JQA Digital Diary, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/jqadiaries/index.php/document/jqadiaries-v36-1828-07-01-p017#sn=28>; in late December 1829, Monroe stayed again with Ringgold after attending the wedding of his younger daughter Hortensia in Baltimore: McGrath, *op. cit.*, 570; *Enquirer*, January 21, 1830, p. 3.

¹² McGrath, *op. cit.*, 570.

¹³ See letter dated September 4, 1830, from Monroe to George Hay: McGrath, 572–73.

¹⁴ *Daily National Intelligencer*, September 27, 1831, p. 4. It was included in a long list of testimonials Ringgold had published in the paper in his effort to become a "General Agent," or lobbyist for people and businessmen doing business with the government, following Jackson's failure to reappoint him.

¹⁵ McGrath, 574.

¹⁶ <https://academics.umw.edu/jamesmonroepapers/2018/11/30/mr-monroes-dying-request/>.

¹⁷ McGrath, 576.

¹⁸ <http://daytoninmanhattan.blogspot.com/2016/05/the-lost-james-monroe-house-prince-and.html>.