

Tench Ringgold and the Lees of Loudoun County, Virginia

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Tench Ringgold, born to a wealthy Eastern Shore Maryland family that moved to western Maryland at the end of the eighteenth century, married twice, both to women whose family name was Lee. The first was the daughter of the Catholic Lees of Maryland, the second to the Protestant Lees of Virginia. Ringgold seems to have remained a Protestant throughout his life,¹ but his children were mostly Catholic, except for his younger son, Thomas Lee Ringgold. The flexibility of faith among the rich families of this part of the country has been noted in studies of religion in America's younger days.² Ringgold's tie to the Lees of Virginia was especially prized by his grandson, Chief Justice Edward Douglass Black, son of Sydney Lee Ringgold and a former governor of Louisiana and staunch southerner.

Tench Ringgold's first wife, Mary Christian Lee Ringgold, the mother of five children, died in 1813. She was the daughter of Thomas Sim Lee, twice governor of Maryland, a wealthy planter and slaveowner who maintained a home in Georgetown and an estate outside Frederick, Maryland, named Needwood. Mary Christian, known as Molly, was also the granddaughter of Ignatius Digges, another wealthy Maryland planter and slaveowner, who had an estate in Prince George's County called Melwood Park. When Ignatius died in 1785, he left four slaves to his granddaughter, Molly, who was then only seven years old.³ When she married Tench, Molly may have brought additional slaves with her, but in any event, Thomas Sim Lee gave a young woman named "Betsy" in 1806 to Mary Digges Galloway Ringgold, the eldest daughter of Tench and Molly. Betsy would have been among the community of enslaved workers in Lee's Georgetown house which he sold that year and moved permanently to Needwood. Betsy, along with the enslaved people inherited from the Digges family, remained in the Ringgold household the rest of their lives.⁴ The Thomas Sim Lees and the Ignatius Digges were Catholic, which may explain why some of the enslaved Blacks in the Ringgold household were baptized at Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown.⁵

Two years after the first Molly Ringgold died, Tench married a second Molly Ringgold who was also a Lee but from the Virginia Anglican/Episcopal plantocracy branch. She was born Mary Aylett Lee, the daughter of Thomas Ludwell Lee II, the grandson of Thomas Lee whose career, marriage, and achievements established the Lee dynasty in Virginia at Stratford Hall in Westmoreland County. Two of his sons, Thomas Ludwell Lee I and Richard Henry Lee, settled in large estates in Loudoun County around the town of Leesburg. Thomas Ludwell Lee II built "Coton" plantation, named after a Lee ancestral home in England, and Richard's son Phillip Ludwell Lee, built "Belmont Manor" which was next door. Molly's mother was Frances Wormley Carter, known as Fanny, the granddaughter of Robert "King" Carter, the largest landowner in Virginia and one of the wealthiest in the colony. She grew up in Cleve Manor in King George's County and Sabine Hall, near Richmond, several of the stately homes of her family she visited with her children on numerous occasions.⁶

Coton no longer exists, not even drawings of it. Belmont Manor, the other Lee estate, is now part of a private club outside of Leesburg and its history is better recorded.⁷ The farms were worked by hundreds of enslaved people and the cemeteries where they placed their dead have recently been recovered and reconsecrated.⁸

Thomas Ludwell Lee died in 1807, leaving Fanny with seven daughters and a mountain of debt. As executrix of his will, Fanny immediately started selling off their inherited property to keep the creditors at bay. The first to go was Berry Hill, a 300-acre estate they inherited in Stafford County. That year Elizabeth Ludwell Lee, one of her daughters, was married to her first cousin, St. Leger Landon Carter, who had inherited Cleve plantation where they lived. The following year, she offered 1,100 acres in various parcels in Loudoun County, the largest being a farm of 500 acres. She also offered a mill on Goose Creek – which didn't sell and went begging for buyers in the next dozen years. Another daughter, Winifred Beale Lee, was shortly thereafter married to William Brent, Jr., who had an estate in Stafford County near her old childhood home. One of his uncles was Robert Brent, the first mayor of Washington, D.C., with whom Tench had gone into partnership to import a brick-making machine from New York (a deal that seems to have fallen through), and it might be through the Brent family that Tench became acquainted with the Lees of Coton. The mill was once again offered for sale, without luck. But in 1813, Fanny then let go of "10 Valuable Negro Men, among whom are four excellent tradesmen, a BLACKSMITH, STONEMASON, CARRIAGE-DRIVER and COOK, and the rest are accustomed to the business of the farm."⁹

When Tench married Molly Lee, the third daughter of Fanny Carter Lee, in October 1815, she was either twenty-two or nearing twenty-five, depending on the source – near the age that was considered shameful to be unmarried – and she came without a dowry. We have no portraits of any of the Lee sisters, and there is little known about her other than her marriage, her antecedents, and offspring.¹⁰ Nonetheless, she brought with her an excellent pedigree that Tench would have prized and which her children by him would cherish.¹¹ Richard Bland Lee, one of Tench's co-commissioners in the reconstruction of Washington after the burning by the British in 1814, was a cousin of Molly's and now part of his family. Although Tench was perhaps fifteen years older than Molly, she produced two children for him and became a devoted mother to the five children from the first Molly.¹² And Tench had energy and connections: by March 1818, he had been given the job of U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia, with a position on Capitol Hill and an entrée to all the powerful men of the city.

Meanwhile, Fanny Lee still struggled with life at Coton where three unmarried daughters remained. She offered the mill on Goose Creek once again in 1817, along with two other tracts nearby and on either side of the new turnpike running between Alexandria and Leesburg.¹³ There may not have been takers at this time, so that the following year, she decided to sell the major part of the estate – the manor house, with its garden and orchard, plus the mill and fifty joining acres and three other tracts, including a forest, amounting to some 1,620 acres.¹⁴ In a separate advertisement, Fanny said that while similar land in the neighborhood could sell for between \$20 and \$25 per acre, she would settle for as low as \$6 for a thousand of those acres.¹⁵ In the summer, Tench and William Brent, her sons-in-law, intervened to purchase eighteen slaves from her, as is evident from this abstract of a bill of sale recorded in the Loudoun County deed book:¹⁶

Bk:Pg: 3A:297 Date: 25 Jul 1818 RtCt: 9 Nov 1818/10 May 1820

Fanny LEE (Exor of Thomas LEE dec'd) of Ldn to William BRENT Jr. of StafVa and Tench RINGOLD of Washington D.C. BoS for slaves Judy, Will, Hector, Vincent, Menokin, Carpenter, George, Harey, old Billy, old Jem, old Toney, young Toney, Gilbert, Molly, Betty, Armstead, Peggy, Judy and Eve belonging to estate of Thomas LEE dec'd. Wit: Robt. M. NEWMAN, Elizabeth L. CARTER.

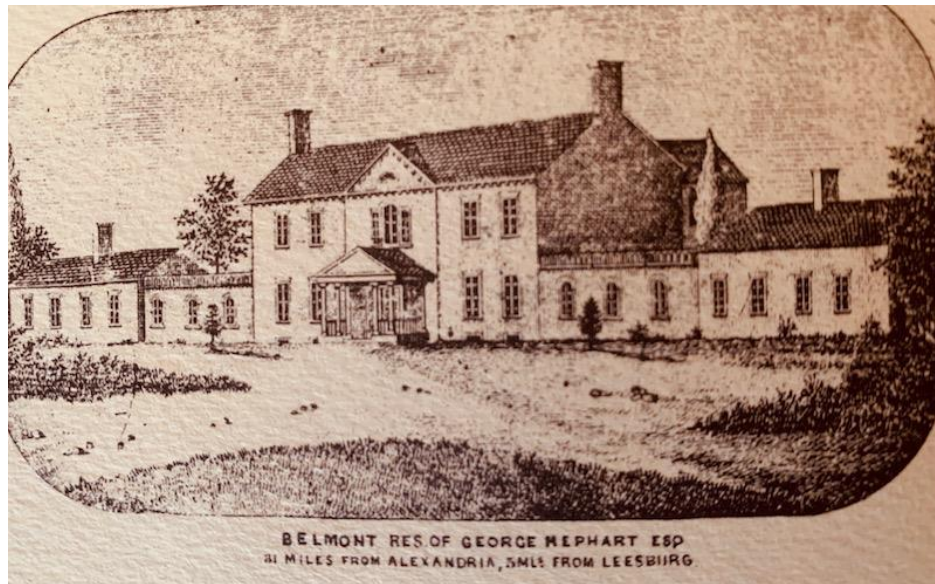
Whether these people were involved in a separate transaction that Tench and William then transferred to other owners or whether they were divided up between them for their own use is unknown, but shortly thereafter, Tench and William offered for sale in Loudoun County “about 40 valuable slaves, some excellent house servants, blacksmiths, carpenters, a good Virginia bred cook, as well as plantation hands, women, girls, and boys....” In this new advertisement, which was placed in newspapers in Maryland, the District, and Virginia, the sellers hoped to sell the entire community to a single purchaser but if not, they will be sold in families or singularly, “as is practicable.” This phrase may have expressed more a gesture of hope than reality.

Public Sale of Negroes.
WILL be exposed at public sale, on the 24th inst. in the town of Leesburg, Loudoun county, Virginia, about 40 valuable slaves, among which are some excellent house servants, blacksmiths, carpenters, an excellent Virginia bread cook, and coachman, as well as plantation hands, women, girls, and boys, all of whom are likely and valuable.
 As these servants have all been brought up in one family, it is desirable to the owner to sell them to one master; they will however, be sold in families, or separately, as far as is practicable—if this wish cannot be gratified. All or any of them may be purchased at private sale, previous to the day of public sale, by application to Wm. Brent, Jr. Richland, Stafford county, Va. or to **TENCH RINGGOLD,** Washington City.
 July 11 31
 The editors of the Baltimore Patriot, Republican Constellation, Winchester, Alexandria Gazette, and Fredericksburg Herald, will please insert the above three times, and forward their accounts to Tench Ringgold for payment.

Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser, July 15, 1818, p. 3.

The summer sale may not have gone as well as they had hoped, so in October Tench and William were again advertising the enslaved workers, but this time along with cattle, hogs, sheep, horses, mules, and farming utensils.¹⁷ The auction was to take place at Coton plantation on the 5th of October. Apparently, that sale was also inconclusive, and so a new auction was planned for December. This time, Fanny’s local agent, a lawyer named Robert H. Newman, took charge – Tench may have had his hands full with his new responsibilities as marshal – advertising the sale of household furniture (mattresses, bedsteads) as well as the livestock mentioned earlier but also 250 barrels of corn. Once more “several valuable negroes” were put up for sale, including “a good weaver, an excellent house servant, two children, a good carriage driver, 4 or 5 plantation hands, a dairy maid, and several elderly negroes who will be sold low to good masters.” The terms this time were cash only – Fanny was selling out and closing her farming operation.

Fanny nonetheless stayed on for an undetermined amount of time. In 1820, another of her daughters, Ann Lucinda Lee, was married “at Coton” to John Mason McCarty, a neighbor.¹⁸ Of the two remaining daughters, Fanny (Jr.) and Sidney, both remained unmarried. Fanny looked after her mother during her remaining years. They may have lived for a while with Fanny’s husband’s cousin’s son, Ludwell Lee, in Belmont Manor, next door where she might have met General Lafayette when he stopped in Leesburg to be celebrated by the local townspeople. The general’s entourage included Tench Ringgold who had traveled with him from Washington to Oak Hill where he visited ex-President Monroe. Molly Ringgold was not part of that party. She was by now suffering edema (dropsy) from which she died in 1826, a year after Lafayette’s visit. Her remains may have been returned to Loudoun County for burial in the Lee family plot near her father at Belmont cemetery on the manor grounds.



Belmont Manor in 1853, from Yardley Taylor’s map of Loudoun County.
Source: “The Ghosts of Belmont,” Lincolnquakers, 2020 (see footnote 5).



Belmont Manor today (same source as above)

Ludwell Lee, the owner of Belmont, died in 1836 and the plantation was sold to Margaret Mercer, a noted early abolitionist who set up a school for young ladies and who also taught

Black girls, for which she is now celebrated. Fanny may at this point have gone with her daughter Fanny to live with Lucinda McCarty or shared a house with Fanny in Alexandria, where, in December 1850, identified as the “relict of Thomas Ludwell Lee,” she passed away.¹⁹ She was mourned for her venerable piety, “like a tree, that with the weight of its own golden fruitage, stoops gently to the dust.”²⁰

¹ His funeral was not celebrated in a Catholic church nor was he buried in a Catholic cemetery; however, he was noted as being among prominent Catholic families in Washington:

² William W. Warner, *At Peace with All Their Neighbors: Catholics and Catholicism in the National Capital, 1787-1860* (Georgetown University Press, 1994).

³ 1784 will of Ignatius Digges, transcribed online at <https://www.colonial-settlers-md-va.us/getperson.php?personID=I9169&tree=Tree1>; I am grateful to Catherine N. Ball drawing attention to this source.

⁴ Terry Walz, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-enslaved-household-of-tench-ringgold>.

⁵ Thomas and Mary Belt, the twin children of the Belts were baptized in 1816: Records of Holy Trinity Church, Georgetown, Washington, DC: <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/556990>, p. 62, image 163. I am grateful to Catherine N. Ball for this information.

⁶ Sally McCarty Pleasants and L. Lee Pleasants, *Old Virginia days and ways: reminiscences of Mrs. Sally McCarty Pleasants* (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta publishing company, 1916).

⁷ A history of the plantation over time: <https://lincolinquakers.com/2020/08/03/the-ghosts-of-belmont-from-margaret-mercer-to-george-kephart/>

⁸ https://www.insidenova.com/news/loudoun/forgotten-no-more-slave-burial-ground-dedicated/article_6c8c477e-7b3c-5230-a556-8edb30feeb86.html ; <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/belmont-enslaved-cemetery>;

⁹ *Alexandria Gazette*, November 16, 1813-, p. 4.

¹⁰ Charles Francis Adams, the son of the president, attended one of her parties in January 1824. He mentions many other people at the party but not Mrs. Ringgold. *Diary of Charles Francis Adams*, vol. 1, ed. by Charles Francis Adams, Aida DiPace Donald, David Herbert Donald, Marc Friedlaender (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), entry for January 15, 1824.

¹¹ Klinkhamer, Marie Carolyn. “The Family Background of Chief Justice White,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 33: 2 (1947): 191–205.

¹² Her obituary which Tench seems to have written, speaks of her fine personal qualities: “Died on Friday last, at her residence in Washington City, Mary A. Ringgold, consort of Tench Ringgold, Esq, Marshal for the District of Columbia, in her 32nd yr of her age. Her sickness (the dropsy), under which she labored for years, was at times painful in the extreme, but she bore it with Christian fortitude... Shortly before she expired, being asked whether the Saviour, in whom she trusted continued to be precious to her heart, she replied, ‘I just lie here and say, Thy will be done.’ The writer of this notice saw her in every stage of her sickness, and was a witness of the painful scene of her departure from scenes temporal to those that are eternal.... It may not be improper to remark, that never was manifested towards a mother-in-law, more sincere regard and affection, than was exhibited, during the whole of her illness, to the last moment of her mortal existence, from the children of her affectionate husband by his former wife”: *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 13, 1826

¹³ *Genius of Liberty*, November 25, 1817, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Genius of Liberty*, April 28, 1818, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 28, 1818, p. 1.

¹⁶ Patricia E. Duncan, *Index to Loudoun County, VA Land Deed Books, 2V-3D, 1817-1822* (Willow Bend Books, 2006), 137. I am once again indebted to Catherine N. Ball for this reference.

¹⁷ *Genius of Liberty*, September 22, 1818, p. 3.

¹⁸ This was after his notorious duel with his cousin, Armistead Thomson Mason, ending in the death of Mason: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2003/02/16/acrimony-over-political-differences-led-to-cousins-fatal-duel/35ee9124-62ef-4bdc-a769-b8a3a469cce9/>

¹⁹ She was bequeathed 515 Duke Street by her uncle, Arthur Lee: Ethelyn Cox, *Historic Alexandria Virginia Street by Street* (Alexandria, 1976), 27.

²⁰ *Alexandria Gazette*, January 1, 1851, p. 2.