

# William Paca, Signer Of the Declaration

by William Paca Bishop



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**T**here are not many Pacas in the whole United States. The name is pronounced "Pay-ka," not "Pack-a," although Baltimore has a Paca Street and residents call it "Pack-a" Street.

How did William Paca arrive on the scene? The first Paca who came to this country from England in 1660 was the great-grandfather of William Paca, the Signer. Historians have a hard time going back any farther than that. Some think the family originated in Italy, where the name may have been Passio. Some of the names of the family in England include Pica, Pecker, Packer and similar variations.

The original American immigrant, Robert Paca, came over with four other people as an indentured servant. That's how a lot of men migrated to the colonies. The person who sponsored him and paid his passage was John Hall, a Maryland planter who was successful enough to do this. Robert Paca apparently had some mathematical ability and so was assigned to keep track of numbers and figures on Hall's plantation. John Hall died about nine months after Paca came into his employ. Not long after, Robert Paca married Hall's widow who had a son named John Hall, like his father. So within a year of arriving in this country Robert Paca was doing quite well with a thriving plantation.

About three years after their marriage Robert Paca and his wife had a son whom they named Aquila. (It was fairly common in those days to name children for early Roman heroes and other historical figures.) Several years later tobacco prices collapsed, selling for about a penny a pound. When Robert Paca died around 1681 he was almost a pauper. Fortunately his stepson John Hall had an inheritance from his father and was able to help the family and get his half-brother Aquila off to a good start.

In 1699 Aquila Paca married Martha Phillips, a woman who had inherited a good deal of money and property from her father. Aquila and Martha Paca lived in Baltimore City and had six children. He was a sheriff, a justice of the peace and a member of the Maryland House of Delegates. He died in 1712 and was able to leave a sizeable patrimony to one of his sons, John, who in turn also married a wealthy woman, Elizabeth Smith.

Now we are into the third generation of American Pacas who had wealth, property and influence. John Paca was active in politics and was also a member of the Maryland House of Delegates. John and Elizabeth had six children. The oldest boy was named Aquila and their second son was William, born in 1740, who became the Signer.

As was customary with affluent families at that time, the male children were sent away from home for their education. At the ages of 14 and 12 Aquila and William were sent to Philadelphia where they attended the Academy of Charity School to learn the basics of the time: mathematics, Latin and Greek. After three years John Paca had Aquila return to the plantation to learn the business that he would eventually inherit.

William subsequently spent four years at the College of Philadelphia, which later became the University of Pennsylvania. His formal schooling was completed at age 19 and he went to Annapolis as clerk to Stephen Bordley, a prominent lawyer of the day. William, well-off in his own right, had a tremendous future in front of him. One of the first things he did in Annapolis was to start a debating club with other young lawyers, one of whom was Samuel Chase, who also became a Signer. The group met twice each month at one of the local taverns to discuss topics of current interest in order to hone their oratorical and debating skills.

William next went to London for additional training with the masters of the law at the Inns of Court. He was one of the few men from the colonies accepted for study there. William returned to the College of Philadelphia to complete his thesis and receive a master of arts degree. When he was 22 he married Anne Mary Chew, who at 28 was much sought-after. She was very wealthy in her own right and was related either by blood or marriage to the leading families of Maryland, among them the Boyds, the Bennetts and the Delanys.

A few days after he and Anne were married William bought property on Prince George Street in Annapolis, where he built a home, then one of the largest in the colonies. (The restored house and gardens are currently open to the public for guided tours.) Anne died a few years later but two of the children she bore William lived to adulthood. William was married again, to a much younger woman, but the children of that marriage died young.



Courtesy The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore

William Paca, in a portrait by C.W. Peale

**I**t was now the early 1770s and Britain had debts from the French and Indian War to be paid off and the colonies seemed a logical place to raise the money. This was a time when the British were trying to prevent the colonies from expanding

beyond the Appalachians and were placing duties on imports and exports through the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act and other restrictive legislation. The colonies began to rebel against taxation without representation.

In Maryland many people objected to the requirement that every voter pay a poll tax that went to support the clergy of the established Anglican Church. The Pacas were Anglicans but William was vigorously opposed to the poll tax. A leading Maryland clergyman, the Reverend Jonathan Boucher, wrote in the *Annapolis Gazette* that Paca was trying to "get in bed with" the governor for personal gain. The governor refuted the charge but the dispute brought the Paca name to the attention of the public as a leader in the cause of independence. William Paca was elected to the lower house of the Maryland provincial legislature at a time when the British controlled the upper house through patronage. He was subsequently elected a delegate to both Continental Congresses.

William Paca signed the Declaration of Independence as a representative of Maryland, along with his friend Samuel Chase, Thomas Stone and Charles Carroll of Carrollton.

**D**uring the Revolutionary War, William Paca equipped militia companies at his own expense and continued to be politically active in Maryland. He became a close friend of George Washington. After the war Washington resigned his commission in Annapolis. Following are two letters they exchanged. The first was written by Paca to Washington in December 1783:

*Sir:*

Amidst the general joy of a happy and honorable termination of the war we beg leave to welcome your excellency's return to this city with hearts full of gratitude and affection.

As long, sir, as mankind shall retain a proper sense of blessing of peace, liberty and safety, your character in every country and in every age will be honored, admired and revered, but to a mind elevated as yours the consciousness of having done great and illustrious deeds from the purest principles of patriotism, of having by your wisdom and magnanimity arrested the arm of tyranny, saved a dear country and millions of fellow citizens and millions yet unborn from slavery and all the horrors and calamities of slavery and placed their rights and liberties on a permanent foundation, must yield a satisfaction infinitely superior to all the pomp, applauding nations and admiring words.

Attached to your excellency by the strongest obligation and feeling the most lively impression of your unparalleled worth and public usefulness, we beg you to accept of our warmest wishes that your life may be prolonged to a far distant period and that it may be as happy in

your retirement as it has been glorious in your field.  
With every sentiment of respect and regard we have the  
honor to be your excellency's most obedient and humble  
servant,

*Wm Paca.*

Washington's reply to William Paca:

*Sir:*

I shall ever cherish a pleasing remembrance of the welcome reception I experienced from your excellency and the council on my return to the city after a happy and honorable termination of the war.

The flattering statements you entertain of my experience and exertions in defense of our country and the favorable plane of light in which you place my character too strongly demonstrate your friendship not to claim the most grateful return from me.

Convinced from experience of the wisdom and decision which have signalized the government of Maryland I cannot form a better wish for the future prosperity of the state than that the same spirit of justice and patriotism which actuated its councils during the long and eventful war may continue to dictate its measures through a durable and happy peace.

With the most perfect consideration I have the honor to be, Sir, your excellency's most obedient and most humble servant,

*Geo. Washington*

**W**illiam Paca was the second governor of Maryland and served three terms, 1782 to 1785. He was instrumental in founding Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland, and served as a judge in the state courts. He was a member of the Maryland convention to ratify the federal Constitution in 1788 and for 10 years was a federal district judge.

He sold his home in Annapolis and moved to the Eastern Shore. From the brother of his first wife he inherited one-half of Wye Island, some 3,000 fertile acres. He built a large home on the Wye River, where he lived until his death in 1799, and is buried on the property. The house burned down in the late 1800s but was restored by a subsequent owner about 20 years ago. Paca family reunions are held on Wye Island every Fourth of July, at which time the Maryland Historical Society and other patriotic groups pay tribute to the Signer. ★