

A Letter in May

The recent change in administrations in Washington has brought many new faces to the national capital. Many of those who accepted appointments to high government posts pondered long and hard before reaching their decision--for it is not easy to uproot one's family and resettle into a new job in a new place.

In May of 1798, a citizen of Prince George's County faced a similar decision. President Adams had asked him to join the administration as Secretary of the newly created Department of the Navy. Accepting the post meant leaving the county and moving to Philadelphia, then the seat of government, many miles away. That citizen of Prince George's County was Benjamin Stoddert of Beall's Pleasure, in Landover. In the letter reproduced below, written to his brother-in-law, Benjamin Lowndes, Stoddert leans toward declining the post, although history has recorded that he eventually did accept the appointment and did become the nation's first Secretary of the Navy. One wonders from reading this letter what single influence most made him accept the high position.

The "concerns on the Beaver Dam" was his home, Beall's Pleasure, now owned by Mrs. Anna C. Rogers. "Becky" was his wife, Rebecca Lowndes Stoddert, daughter of Christopher Lowndes of Bladensburg.

To Benjamin Lowndes, Esq. Bladensburg

Georgetown 26 May 1798
I suppose you have heard of my appointment to be Secretary of the Navy of the United States. I have not determined to accept--and what you will think more extraordinary, I have not determined to refuse. I hate office--have no desire for fancies, or real importance--I wish to spend my life in retirement, and ease without bustle of any kind. Yet it seems cowardly, at such a time as this, to refuse an important and highly responsible appointment. And at all times, there is as much Vanity in refusing, as in accepting a post beyond a man's Talents--for after all the modesty assumed on such occasions, who, examining well his motives, ever did refuse an office because he thought it above his abilities? You know I have heretofore managed peaceable ships very well. Why should I not be able to direct as well those of War? After all this preface, I think there is about 30 to 1 that I shall not accept. But that I may be able to consider every side of the question--prayer let me know whether you will in case I do accept, and undertake to oversee as the owner of my concerns on the Beaver Dam for two years and a half. You would have to ride to each place once a week--oftener, if agreeable to you--and to issue orders for the week--To direct the operations of getting my wood in the low grounds only, send to market, as long as it would pay one dollar per cord beyond expenses. To direct the sending of the wood to market, by water and to receive all money arising from such operations--and to pay out of the receipts all the expenses.

All this would require some of your time--and some attention. I know if you would take it all--it would serve be to serve me--but to have a proper tie upon your conscience to give the attention required I should insist on your receiving all the money for the wood and other products of the place.

I dont believe I shall go, if you would undertake this--but most assuredly I shall not if you will not.

If I do I mean to have the bricks made at Bladensburg--and to have the fourth gable end taken down and rebuilt, and add a room to the house--but I shall not be in so much hurry to do this--but merely have prepared against my return. After 2-1/2 years bustle, both Becky (who is not alarmed at the society at Phil.) nor myself, shall be fond enough of spending the rest of our times in tranquility at Bladensburg.

I am yours sincerely,

Ben Stoddert

Sunday

I must determine by tomorrow stage. I send then for your answer. I am not today so adverse to going as I was yesterday. But I think going impossible.

---Submitted by William Aleshire and John Brennan, who performed the difficult job of translating Stoddert's handwriting into typescript copy. The letter is from the Library of Congress Manuscript Division, George W. Campbell papers, AC9903. Mr. Aleshire is doing the research to nominate Beall's Pleasure to the National Register of Historic Places. More news on this project next month.

The Duvall Pecans

The following item, submitted by Ted Bissell, is taken from a recently published booklet from the American Forestry Association.

The Duval Pecans (Maryland)

"About 1784, Thomas Jefferson presented Gabriel Duvall (1752-1844) of Maryland some pecan seedlings (Carya illinoensis). The trees were planted at Duvall's estate "Marietta" in Prince George's County. This estate, now in the community of Glenn Dale, was part of the original land grant by King Charles I of England to Cecil Calvert, second Lord Baltimore, in 1632. Duvall was a member of Congress, comptroller of the Treasury under President Thomas Jefferson for nine years, and an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court for 24 years (1812-1835).

"At Marietta, built in the 1780's many distinguished visitors were entertained, including Presidents Washington, Jefferson, and Madison.

"Seven of the pecans are still living. They stand in front of the original entrance of the manor house on Bell Station Road and vary in diameter from three to four feet at breast height. The property is now owned and maintained by the Maryland Capital Park and Planning Commission."