

Charles Fenton Mercer

By Rod Mackler

We are familiar with Charles F. Mercer from the name stenciled on the stern of the canal packet at Great Falls Tavern. Most of us know him as the first president of the C&O Canal Company. His name is also engraved in stone on the plaque at the center of the Monocacy Aqueduct and on the spandrel of the bridge over the canal on Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown.

Let's take a look at some of Mercer's other roles: entrepreneur, promoter, politician, and soldier.

Charles Fenton Mercer was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1778, during the American Revolution. He graduated Princeton and became a lawyer in Loudoun County, Virginia. In 1810, Mercer established the village of Aldie, Virginia, on the banks of the Little River, and harnessed the stream's power with a grist mill, the basis of his later fortunes. Both the mill and Mercer's home in Aldie are still standing, over 200 years later.

Mercer served in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1810 to 1817. He rose to the rank of brigadier general of the 2nd Virginia Brigade during the War of 1812. He was elected as a Federalist, and later, as a Whig to the United States House of Representatives, where he served from 1817 to 1839. He was the chairman of the Committee on Roads and Canals from 1831 to 1839, that is, concurrently with his presidency of the C&O Canal Company (1828-1833). ("Conflict of interest" was not a term in the political vocabulary as it is today.)

We generally think of a river as larger than a creek, but these terms have no precise definitions and in this case the Little River is a tributary of Goose Creek. (Goose Creek was designated a Virginia State Scenic River in 1976.) Both of these streams were to some extent navigable. Improvements were made by the Goose Creek and Little River Navigation Company, using short canals and stone locks around the largest obstructions in the streams, and removing boulders from the main channel. Canal boats, half the length of those on the C&O, were poled, rather than pulled by mules or horses. Their principle cargo was milled grain, though the navigation never reached Mercer's mill at Aldie. One can still see the ruins of locks and one of the mills on Goose Creek between State Route 7 and the Potomac River.



Mercer's Mill – photo by Rod Mackler



Charles Fenton Mercer home, Aldie, Va., built circa 1810 – photo by Rod Mackler

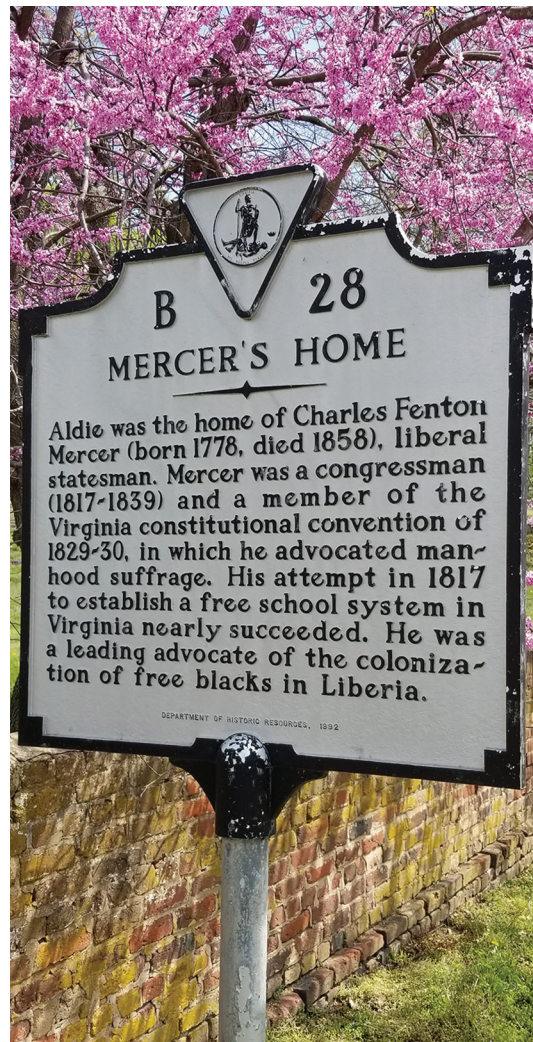
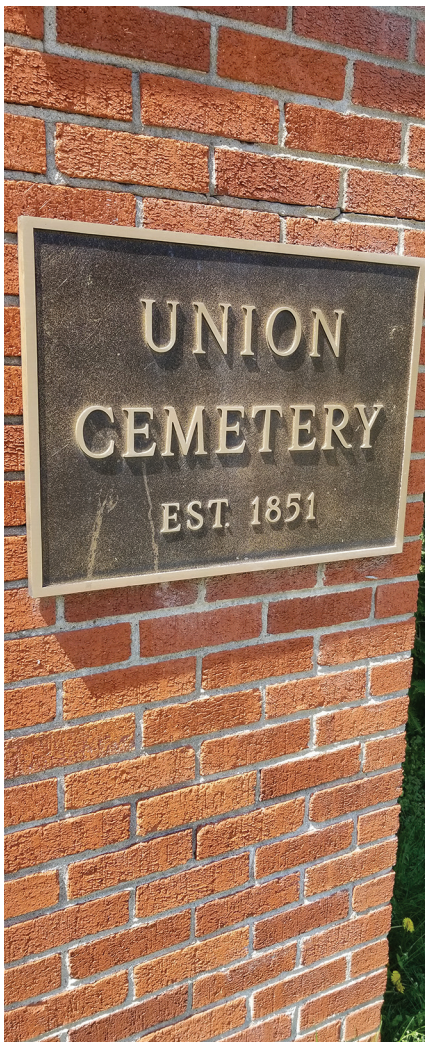
The C&O Canal built a river lock in 1837-38 near Edwards Ferry, at mile 30.64, opposite the mouth of Goose Creek. This was intended to permit cargo from Goose Creek and Little River to enter the canal. The Goose Creek River Lock is a two-lift lock combine with a total lift of about 15 1/2 feet. The upper lock has a lift of eight feet; its lower gate is also the upper gate for the lower lock, which has a lift of about 7 1/2 feet, depending upon the water level in the river. Although common on other canals, this is the only case on the C&O where two locks share a gate. This is one of three river locks that the Virginia Legislature required in 1833 as a condition of its financial support for the canal. The other two are at Shepherdstown and at Harpers Ferry, across from the mouth of the Shenandoah River.

Mercer was, not surprisingly, a strong supporter of “internal improvements,” the term in his day for infrastructure, especially roads and canals.

The marker in front of his Aldie home calls Charles F. Mercer a “liberal statesman.” One must be careful using today’s buzz-words to describe politicians two hundred years

ago. He did advocate expanded suffrage in the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829-30 and he supported state funding for public education, including Jefferson’s University of Virginia.

Mercer was a founding member of the American Colonization Society, which promoted the “return” of free Blacks to Africa. This has been cited as a progressive concept, often referencing Abraham Lincoln’s support for the idea. But Lincoln’s views evolved from there. Take a look at the supporters and opponents of colonization. Most abolitionists and freedmen opposed the movement. Frederick Douglass gave Lincoln a talking-to on this subject in the White House. The strongest support for colonization came from slave states. Mississippi even established its own colony in Liberia. In short, free Blacks were seen as a threat to slavery, as an enticement to uprisings and as supporters of the Underground Railroad. In any case, the colonization movement collapsed because of the reluctance of free Blacks to sign on and because of the cost of shipping people across the sea. Incidentally, the colonization movement, which sent about 15,000 Blacks to Liberia, had a



Mercer is buried at Union Cemetery; Sign at Mercer’s home; despite the naming as a creek, Goose Creek is a river — photos by Rod Mackler

negligible impact on the free Black population in the U.S., but an enduring one in West Africa. The descendants of English-speaking “returnees” from North America dominated Liberian politics, at the expense of the indigenous majority, until 1980.

Charles F. Mercer died near Alexandria and is buried in Leesburg’s Union Cemetery. The marble ledger stone disintegrated over time and had been overlaid with a granite marker installed in 2005 by “the Society of the War of 1812 in Virginia.” The epitaph reads:

SACRED
to the memory of
GEN. CHARLES FENTON MERCER
Born June 16th, 1778
Died May 4th, 1858
Aged 79 years 10 months & 18 days
A Patriot, Statesman, Philanthropist
and Christian
After spending his life in the service of
Mankind, he died at peace with the
world and in the favour of God.



C&O Canal Goose Creek river lock – photo by Steve Dean

