

Carroll Yesteryears
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Letter Adds to the Legend of Legh Master
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Some stories never end. That is the case for one of our area's controversial early settlers, Legh Master.

You may have read about him in *The Ghost of Legh Furnace* by George Donald Riley, Jr., or driven past his old property known as Avondale just off Route 31 outside Westminster. A letter recently received by the Historical Society of Carroll County adds another colorful chapter to the Master legend.

There is plenty of evidence surrounding the life of Legh Master, a well-educated and wealthy Englishman who purchased thousands of acres in what is now Carroll County in the 1760s and began operation of an iron furnace. The iron ore on his property was not high grade and the furnace may never have operated very long although the mining did. During the American Revolution, Master supported the English cause. He fled to his property in the Caribbean but returned to Maryland at war's end and died at Avondale in 1796. His body was buried near his house in an above-ground, box-style brick tomb.

Fast forward. The wealthy Van Bibber family from Baltimore bought Master's property. Washington Van Bibber (1778-1848) raised several sons and daughters there in a handsome brick house while allowing limited iron mining and limestone quarrying on the surrounding land. The Van Bibber children played on the grounds as they were growing up. Washington passed Avondale on to his son Thomas Emory (1812-1882). In 1879, the elderly Thomas wrote a nostalgic letter to the Master family in England to share his memories of Legh Master's grave. That is the letter which has come to light.

Thomas wrote, "How often in my boyhood have I, with my brothers and sisters, sported with the willow tree which overshadowed the tombstone, which was then in one corner of our garden, weaving dandelion chains, as children weave daisy chains in England. How often did we shout the name of Legh Master to wake up a sleeping Echo which answered three times from eastside of the dwellinghouse."

Eventually Legh Master's tomb stood near the edge of Avondale's iron ore pit that had become a pond. "Then the grave hung so picturesquely on the brink of the precipice, with the vines and pendent shrubbery below it, that it was an interesting object to look upon. At one time we had a gaily painted rowboat on the pond, and those who were wafted in the same, never failed to have the site of the grave pointed out to them...."

Thomas permitted limestone quarrying until 1876 when "the east end of the grave was actually laid bare, and my son on examining one day the premises some fifty feet below, found that some of the small bones had fallen from above...I immediately stopped all further quarrying and gave orders to open the grave and carefully collect all that remained of the skeleton."

Rev. Isaac Nicholson, rector at Ascension Church where the Van Bibber family worshipped, “sent out to transfer the tombstone and every brick belonging to the grave to the churchyard in Westminster. The bones were also nicely boxed up and sent in to the same locality.”

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a library volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Photo credit: Submitted by Catherine Baty

Photo caption: The box-style tomb of Legh Master, originally erected on his property outside Westminster, was moved to Ascension Episcopal Church on North Court Street, Westminster, in 1876.