

William Easby

(22 Jan 1791 – 29 Jul 1854)

Easby. On the 29th instant, in the 64th year of his age, Capt. William Easby.

The National Intelligencer, August 1, 1854

Obituary

Died, at his residence in this city, on Saturday, the 29th ultimo, after an afflicting illness of nine days, Captain William Easby, in the 64th year of his age.

In the death of this estimable citizen the people of Washington have sustained a great loss. From 1812, the date of his settlement here, he has been actively identified with the growth and interest of the city and its inhabitants; and amongst his numerous friends there are many who have grown up with him and the city together. These will feel his loss most sensibly and deeply.

The deceased was an Englishman by birth; but, having been brought to this country by parents in his infancy, he was thoroughly Americanized both in feeling and principle; ever looking, however, with becoming pride upon his native country, which he re-visited in 1849 as bearer of dispatches to the American Minister and as Commissioner to the World's Fair.

In 1812 Capt. Easby was one of the most energetic and dauntless of the young volunteers who acted against the British army in its memorable approach to Washington.

Capt. Easby was best known by the indomitable perseverance with which he prosecuted all his enterprises, whether public or private. This characteristic induced President Fillmore to appoint him Commissioner of Public Buildings in Washington, which office he held several years, giving the most complete satisfaction by his prompt and energetic discharge of its duties.

Capt. Easby was, at the time of his death, and had been for many years previously, the Treasurer of the National Institute, an association of the leading intelligence's of Washington for the promotion of science.

In all his business transactions he was distinguished for straightforward integrity and honesty of purpose. In his feelings he was generous and humane, never refusing to assist the poor or the afflicted.

In addition to his generous emotions and his fine business qualities, he was a man of remarkable intelligence and of elevated taste. Notwithstanding his activity in the transaction of the business of out-of-door life, he had found time and leisure to bring together an extensive library of the most rare and elegant books, amongst which are many curious specimens of manuscripts, typography, and ancient paintings and engravings.

This library consists of about twenty-five hundred volumes, and combines in itself almost everything which is essential to science or beautiful in literature. In this intellectual retreat Capt. Easby was accustomed to spend a large portion of his time, always profitably and agreeably employed; and to this he fondly looked for that retirement where the evening of his days could be passed in those quiet pursuits which are so congenial to declining age; but, alas! in the midst of the soothing contemplation of these approaching enjoyments, surrounded by the ministers of happiness which he had spent his life in accumulating, he fell, when he least expected it, into the arms of that spectral visitor from whose mournful treat no chamber is free.

Capt. Easby met death with the utmost fortitude and composure, at peace with all the world, and surrounded by most of the members of his immediate family, whose efforts to soothe him in his afflictions and to save him were unremitting, though fruitless.

The poor will need him; his friends will miss him; the energetic and the active will inquire for him; and the answer to all of these will be, in the ancient phrase of the preacher, (Ecclesiastes,) "Man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets."

The National Intelligencer, August 18, 1854

The late Captain Easby - 21 years ago the newspapers of the day were praising the workmanship and sailing qualities of the ship 'Russia' built at Washington by the late Captain William Easby.

The National Intelligencer, April 1, 1854

Canal Steamboat

We learn that a handsome canal steamboat was yesterday launched at Easby's ship yard, and afterwards hauled to the wharf near the Eagle Iron Works, for the purpose of receiving her engine, just manufactured by Mr. William McKinstry. We understand this new steamboat is intended to ply on the Rappahannock canal.

The Evening Star, Dec. 7, 1913

In Odd Nooks and Crannies with the Rambler

In the Star of recent date it was announced that "a pictorial history of Washington is the plan of the Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia," and that at the last meeting "Corresponding Secretary John B. McCarthy called attention to the fact that there had been presented to the association the model of the first ship launched at the Eastern shipyards in Washington in 1829, and also the original permit issued under the signature of Peter Force, May 26, 1840, to William Easby to extend a wharf into the Potomac river."

This brings to the Rambler's mind that not long ago he wrote, from data given him by the daughter of Capt. William Easby, a sketch of that worthy gentleman and the story of the family home at Pennsylvania avenue and 9th street southeast, called by the Easby's "Warwick," and which previously had been Tunnecliff's Hotel, a building which was erected several years before the removal of the seat of government to Washington.

Capt. Easby's daughter has preserved interesting memories of Easby's point. She told the Rambler that the part of the city in which Easby's point is situated was, before the establishment of the District of Columbia, part of a tract belonging to Robert Peter, and on the map of the first survey was called "Mexico." There were many plats of ground variously named - Hamburg, beyond Camp Hill, on the river above and to the north were Port Royal, Widow's Mite and Jamaica, and among others was Mount Pleasant, which also belonged to Robert Peter. Mrs. Easby-Smith remarked to the Rambler that she had often wondered how this holding of Mr. Peter came by the name "Mexico," and whether the visit of the Spaniards to a point on the Potomac river supposed now to be Occaquan, and who afterward returned to Mexico, had any bearing on the matter.

In dealing with the locality of Easby's point it is interesting to recall a paper which Hugh Taggart read before the Columbia Historical Society, May 13, 1907, in which he said: "The mouth of Rock Creek of our day does not exhibit a single feature of its appearance in 1751, when Georgetown was created. At that time the creek was a navigable stream within which the tide ebbed and flowed for a considerable distance above the present P street bridge; then, and for many years subsequently, there were visible in it, on frequent occasions, the tall masts of the trader to European ports, where now the only water craft to be seen is the sand scow.

“The creek at its junction with the river formed quite a large bay; its mouth extended from the point near the old Observatory grounds, where Littlefield’s wharf is located (which point was first known as Cedar point, and afterward successively as Windmill point, Peters point and Easby’s point) to a point on the present Water street between 31st street, which was formerly known as Congress street, and Wisconsin avenue, which as formerly known as High street.”

When Capt. Easby bought this property upon which he decided to locate there was only a bare stretch of land and water from the point where a rock cabin, supposed to have been the dwelling of the keeper of the vanished windmill, to the stone house on the river’s edge between G and H streets. The old stone house was very large and was probably built for a custom house, being at the confluence of the river and Rock creek. It was only a few years ago that this old landmark was demolished.

On square No. 12 Capt. Easby built his dwelling and tenant house. On the square to the south the ship lofts were erected and afterward the wharves. At first, and until the residence was completed he and his and John boarded with a family at the Stone House, only returning to their home, Warwick, on the navy yard, for weekends. In the same square with the ship lofts was the plant in which ship timbers were steamed, and later on this lot were built an ice house and the blacksmith shop where sheet iron buoys for the government were constructed.

With doors opening into the shipyard and others on the towpath of the canal, between the bridge and the point was the engine house, and at this place fire drills were frequently held.

It was within the limits of Hamburg where, in 1833, Capt. Easby built his lime kilns. Hamburg was originally a village of some pretensions, at least on paper. It was laid out at the instance of Jacob Funk into squares and streets, and in the center was a large plot for a town house. It extended north from the river and included H street. L’Enfant, in one of his letters, calls the village Funkstown, and it was commonly and variously called Hamburg and Funkstown. Mrs. Easy-Smith told the Rambler that Funk was a gunmaker in Georgetown during the American Revolution and that it seems that quite a colony of Hamburgers settled thereabouts early in the eighteenth century.

“After the completion of the canal,” continued Capt. Easby’s daughter, “the towpath from Rock creek to D street was on its east side. Here, crossing the bridge it formed the boundary of the shipyard. Turning eastward near the point it ran on the south side of the canal to 17th street, where the Goose creek basin was located. Upon this towpath traveled the mules that drew the barges and in my childhood there were not many hours in the day that laden boats might not be seen on their way to the Eastern branch.

“It is more than three-quarters of a century since I first opened my eyes at Easby’s point. I do not remember quite so far back as that particular 14th of July, 1835, but I do distinctly recollect events that took place when I was not more than three years of age. My first remembrance of crossing the river to the Washington who cared for our horses and cow. The skiff was paddled over every evening to bring back a load of the sweet meadow grass which we were privileged to cut.

“I well remember George Washington Parke Custis and his family. Mrs. Lee was quite an artist, which aroused my interest in her. She made a fine copy of a Turner my father owned, a privilege he allowed no one else.

“Gen. Lee often crossed to our landing on his way to the department or the City. The interchange of boats was customary if they chanced to have been left at either of our respective landings.

“Lately I visited the old home of my childhood, but the place was well nigh unrecognizable. The dwelling house, large for those days is transformed into a blacksmith shop and the upper rooms into a depository for junk. The old garden, which occupied half the square except the corner lot, where dwelt the Ferguson family, has disappeared. The luscious fruit, figs, grapes, apples, pears and prunes, and the rare flowers that attracted many visitors, have long since perished. This part of the property is now covered by buildings. The bridge which spanned the canal is gone for the canal is no longer there. The shipyard has been transformed into an establishment for asphalt work. Not a vestige of the old rock

cabin remains. Beyond its site, Littlefield's wharf has been constructed. Ere long all these will have been wiped off the earth and effaced from the maps, the whir and honk of the automobile and the hoof beats of blooded steeds will replace the sound of the hammers and steam whistles of busy industries, and Potomac Park will be the new name of Easby's point."

In the old rock cabin on the point lived Dyson Moran, who had charge of all the horses used in the various branches of Capt. Easby's plant and was also the driver of Mrs. Easby's carriage.

On 26th street, in the rear of the Easby's garden, lived a family, one of the sons of which, John Faraday, learned shipbuilding in the Easby yard. Later he built a fine shipbuilding plant in Baltimore, accumulated a large fortune and died in that city. The plant established by Faraday belongs now to the Woodall family, who are relatives of Capt. Easby's descendants.

South of the Easby blacksmith shop lived Ignatius Lucas and his wife. In those days there were no trained nurses. Neighbors visited and helped to care for the sick as part of neighborly duty, and chief among those was Mrs. Lucas, who was friend, counselor and comforter to the whole settlement. Mr. Lucas for many years filled a position in either the War or the Navy Department.

The Cumberland's lived on the next lot and their nets and their huge ducking guns were curiosities to the children roundabout. John Cumberland's third wife was a remarkable woman. She was the mistress of the house in which there were four families of children, and they all lived together in peace and happiness.

The brewery on the northwest corner of Potomac Park now covers the lot on which the Cumberland's and the Lucas's lived and also the site where John Boyle had his residence. John Boyle was a conspicuous citizen and so closely resembled Gen. Zachary Taylor that each was often mistaken for the other.

On the square east of the lime kiln a glass factory was established in 1824. It was abandoned not many years after, but the building remained long standing. Much of the time it was untenanted and fell into decay. No sign of it remained when the speedway was first projected. Edward Hanley was Capt. Easby's partner in the lime kilns until the captain's death, when Hanley bought the whole interest. Mr. Hanley at first lived on 19th street below F, but later built a fine house on G street near 20th, where he died not long after moving into it. Aleanah Denham was the manager of the lime kilns for more than twenty years. He moved into the house on 19th street vacated by Mr. Hanley and died there in 1881.

There were gala days at the point when a ship was launched. As these were generally built for the government, the guests usually included cabinet officers, officials of high rank and frequently members of the diplomatic corps. The daughter of Capt. Easby, telling the Rambler of these events, said:

Every detail for a launching must be carefully prepared that no hitch or blunder may occur, and the workmen waited with baited breath for the success of the launching, for these, in those olden times were greatly interested in their work and became really attached to their construction as it grew into graceful proportions. It was a beautiful and exciting scene to watch the large vessel start on the ways, and to listen to the strokes of the hammers that loosed the wedges, to see her slowly gathering impetus as she glided gracefully down into the water upon whose bosom she was to spend her life and beneath which sooner or later she would find her grave. Then a collation spread in one of the ship lofts was enjoyed by guests and employees.

I well remember the launching of the revenue cutters "Forward", in 1842 or 1843 and the "Laurence" in 1848. The "Laurence" was in commission for more than a quarter of a century and may still be in existence. My brother, Dr. James Thompson Overstreet, whose father a congressman from South Carolina, was my mother's first husband, was appointed surgeon of the "Laurence" which sailed around the Cape to California. Dr. Overstreet was accidentally killed in Los Angeles in 1853.

The Evening Star, Oct. 28, 1854

The Late William Easby

The National Institute pay the following tribute to the memory of an esteemed member:

Whereas, since the last meeting of the National Institute, it has pleased an all-wise Providence to remove by death William Easby, Esq., one of our most active and useful fellow-members: Therefore –

Resolved, That the National Institute has sustained a deep and afflicting loss in the death of its late lamented Treasurer, Wm. Easby, Esq., whose usefulness and value as a member and officer of this institution cannot easily be supplied.

Resolved, That the members of the institute deeply sympathize with the afflicted family of our deceased fellow-member in their loss and bereavement.

Resolved, That these proceedings be entered on the minutes and a copy thereof be transmitted to the family of the deceased by the Corresponding Secretary.

History of the Naval Lodge, No. 4, F.A.A.M.

William Easby, who occupied the East in 1827, affiliated with the Lodge Oct. 7, 1826. He was a prominent business man of that period conducting a large ship-building plant at what was known as Easby's Point near Georgetown, D.C. Under his supervision was built the brig "Lawrence," which made one of the first trips around the "Horn" to California in the gold fever of '49. His old home, at that time surrounded by spacious grounds, which city improvements have since largely curtailed, still stands at the corner of Ninth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue S.E. During his somewhat limited career as a member of the Lodge he took an active part in its affairs.