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THE WILL OF JOHN ROLFE

by JANE CARSON*

EARLY in the summer of 1609 a fleet of nine ships sailed from Plymouth, bearing to Virginia the Third Supply of settlers and provisions and the first group of government officials under the Company's new charter. The flagship, the *Sea-Venture*, carried Sir George Somers, Admiral; Sir Thomas Gates, Deputy Governor; William Strachey, Secretary; Captain Christopher Newport, and about 150 emigrants, among whom was a young man in his middle twenties, John Rolfe. Late in July a severe storm scattered the fleet, and the *Sea-Venture*, seriously damaged, ran aground just off one of the Bermudas. All the passengers were safely brought ashore, where they lived comfortably enough for the next eight months. With tools and timbers salvaged from the wreck, supplemented by lumber cut from the island's trees, they managed to build two small vessels which took them on to Jamestown in the spring.

The other ships of the fleet had weathered the storm and gone directly to Virginia, bringing the London plague, yellow fever, and ruined supplies to a colony already burdened with troubles enough. The terrible winter that followed is fittingly called the Starving Time. Thus Virginia's fortunes had reached their lowest point when John Rolfe arrived in May, 1610. Jamestown appeared to Sir Thomas Gates "rather as the ruins of some auntient [for]tification then that any people living might now inhabit it . . . the Indians as fast killing without as the famine and pestilence within."¹ Since houses and provisions were inadequate, Gates decided to abandon the colony. Early in June the four available ships, loaded with all the colonists and supplies, started down the James, bound for Newfoundland; about fifteen miles from Jamestown they were met by a long boat from Lord Delaware's ship anchored at Point Comfort, announcing the timely arrival of the Governor himself with three supply ships and 150 new settlers. Once again the Jamestown experiment was renewed, but the existence of the

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¹Delaware and Council to the Virginia Company, July 7, 1610, in Alexander Brown, *Genesis of the United States* (Boston, 1890), I, 405.

colony remained precarious until some solution could be found for the two most pressing problems: the threat of hostile Indians and the need of some profitable native product to provide economic security.

John Rolfe played a leading role in the discovery of a solution to each of these problems. His first three years in Virginia were difficult ones both for him and his fellow colonists. At some time during that period he experimented with the native tobacco and succeeded in producing a leaf more palatable to British taste than that grown in the West Indies. It is generally believed that he perfected a curing process which would prevent injury from the dampness of the sea voyage and the English climate, thus giving to Virginia a sound basis for economic prosperity.

His celebrated marriage to Pocahontas in April, 1614, was followed by eight years of peace with all the Virginia Indians. "Ever since [the marriage]," wrote Secretary Hamor, "we have had friendly commerce and trade not only with Powhatan himselfe, but also with his subjects round about us, so as now I see no reason why the Collonie should not thrive apace."² The freedom from Indian warfare and from anxious preparations for defense afforded greater opportunity for building up the colony, and general confidence in the success of the Virginia experiment may be dated from this Indian peace.

When Rolfe and his wife visited England in 1616, the enthusiastic reception accorded Pocahontas as "the Lady Rebecca" served as favorable publicity for Virginia as well. Rolfe's *Relation*, written for King James and Sir Robert Rich while the author was in England, presented an optimistic picture which further boosted the spirits of the King and Company. He wrote: "Our people yearely plant and reape quietly, and travell in the woods a fowling and a hunting as freely and securely from fear of danger or treacherie as in England. The great blessings of God have followed this peace, and it, next under him, hath bredd our plentie — everie man sitting under his fig tree in safety, gathering and reaping the fruits of their labours with much joy and comfort."³

After his return to Virginia, Rolfe held prominent positions in the colony. He had succeeded Hamor as Secretary in 1614 and in 1617 held the office of Recorder General as well; he was a member of the Council from 1619 until his death in 1622. He is believed to have been a victim of the mas-

²Ralph Hamor, *A True Discourse of the Present Estate of Virginia* (London, 1615), quoted in Mary Newton Stanard, *The Story of Virginia's First Century* (Philadelphia, 1928), p. 119.

³John Rolfe, *A True Relation of the State of Virginia at the Time When Sir Thomas Dale Left it in May, 1616* in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, V (June, 1839), 402-3.

sacre of that year, but the fact that he was ill in 1621, when he made his will, casts some doubt on the truth of the tradition.

Rolfe was married three times. His first wife accompanied him on the trip to Virginia, where she died soon after their arrival. The only child of this marriage was a daughter, Bermuda, who was christened on the island for which she was named, and appears to have died there. His second wife, Pocahontas, died in England at Gravesend, while they waited for a favorable wind to take the ship back to Virginia. Rolfe's only son, Thomas, was her child. His third wife, Jane, survived him, and their daughter, Elizabeth, was living with them in Virginia when Rolfe made his will.

Although John Rolfe has long been a subject of great interest to Virginia genealogists and historians, a significant figure about whom little is known, his will has been published only in abstract.⁴ The reason may well be attributed to the fact that it contains no evidence to support the traditions which have collected about his name. For example, the reader is disappointed to find no reference to lands in Bermuda Hundred, for tradition tells that he owned a plantation about fifteen miles below Richmond at Varina. Here he is supposed to have lived with his Indian bride and to have raised his first crop of improved tobacco; and the fact of the severity of the massacre of 1622 in that region forms the chief basis for the conclusion that he was killed by the Powhatan Indians. But in spite of its omissions, the document is an important addition to the scanty source materials from which his role in history is written.

The will was drawn in Jamestown March 10, 1621,⁵ and probated in London May 21, 1630. The original copy probably remained in the hands of his executor and has disappeared. But two copies are still in London, where they may be examined today. The probate copy (PCC 1630) bears a notation showing careful comparison with the original and two signatures attesting the accuracy of this copy. The registered copy (49 Scroope) is a duplicate of the probate in every detail except for variations in spelling (*ie* for *y*, *tion* for *con* and the like), less frequent capitalization and fewer marks of punctuation. Photostats of both are in the Manuscript Division of the University of Virginia Library. It is the probate copy which is here transcribed.

⁴See *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, January, 1844, p. 68.

⁵This date and the others which follow are Old Style.

T[ESTAMENTUM] JOHIS ROLFE

Rgr⁶ IN THE NAME OF GOD AMEN: The Tenth day of March Anno dñi 1621 And in the yeare of the Raigne of o^r Sovereaigne Lorde James by the grace of god Kinge of England Scotland France and Ireland defender of the Faith &c That is to say of England France and Ireland the Nyneteenth And of Scotland the 1vth I John Rolfe of James Citty in Virginia Esquire beinge sicke in body, but of perfecte minde and memory [(C)]laude and prayse be given to Almightye god therefore) doe make and ordaine this my laste and finall will and testament in forme followeing that is to say: Firste and principally I doe Co^mend my soule into the hands of Almightye god my maker and Redeemer, assuredly trusteing in the meritts of Jesus Christe my Lorde and onely Savio^r, to have full and ample remission of all my sinnes, and to inheritte wth him a por^{cion} of the glorious kingdome of god, with all the holy Angells and Archaungells and blessed S^{ts} and electe of that Eternall kingdome: And my body I Committe to the Earth [(C)] in hope of a Joyfull resurrection) to be buried att the discretion of my Executo^r hereafter named in such decent and Comely or I sic⁷ manner as vnto my said Executo^r shalbe thoughte fitte: Item whereas Almightye god hath bestowed vpon me two small children of very tender age⁸ for whose bringing vppe and educa^{cion} in the faith and true feare of the same god I knowe myselfe obliged to be zealously carefull. Therefore I do Co^mend and Co^mitte them vnto the tuition of my deerely beloved friend and father in Lawe Leivetenant William Pyers gent⁹ vpon whose love and favo^r in this behalfe I doe with greate Confidence depend: And for their better meanes of Sustenta^{cion} and educa^{cion}, I doe hereby devise and ordaine, that my said Father in Lawe shall and may have, hold, receiue, take, order and dispose of all and all Manner such estate and estates, as vnto them shall discend and come, and of Right belonge and appertaine dureinge the time of

⁶*Registratum*; i.e., entered in the Register. This has reference to the Registered copy of the will, which is still in existence, and from which certain bracketed portions of this transcript have been supplied.

⁷*Originale sic*. Has reference to the caret insertion of the word *said* into the text.

⁸A son, Thomas, aged five or six, and a daughter, Elizabeth, about one year old. See notes 11 and 12 below.

⁹Spelled in other contemporary records Pierce, Perce, Peirce. The date of his arrival in Virginia is uncertain; John Smith listed William Perce as a laborer who came in the First Supply, but the Muster of the Inhabitants of James City, taken in 1625, stated that he came in the *Sea-Venture*. In January, 1624, he owned land on Jamestown Island and was living on Rolfe's lands near Mulberry Island, where thirty of his company were stationed. In May, 1623, he was commissioned Captain of the Guard and Commander of James City and the Island to replace William Powell, who had been killed by the Indians the year before. In March, 1624, he sat in the House of Burgesses for James City. When Governor Francis Wyatt planned a concerted attack against the Indians in August, 1623, he sent Captain Pierce against the Chickahomines. Sir Edwin Sandys, visiting Virginia in 1623, criticized Sir George Yeardley and the "weak" Council, but commended four of the colony's officers, among them Pierce. "Neither is Leiftenant Peirce (now Gounour of James Towne) inferiour to anie," he wrote to John Ferrar, "expert in the Countrie, who refuses no labour, nor stickes at anie expenses, that may aduantage the publike, and of a Capacitie that is not to be expected in a man of his breeding." — John Smith, *Generall Historie* in Edward Arber, ed., *Works* (Birmingham, 1884), p. 411; John C. Hotten, ed., *Original Lists of Persons of Quality . . . and Others Who Went from Great Britain to the American Plantations, 1600-1700* (New York, 1931), pp. 224, 240, 271; Susan M. Kingsbury, ed., *Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, 1933), IV, 111, 209, 250-1, 556.

their minority. Item whereas by certaine Letters Pattents vnder the Comon or generall Seale of the Kings Ma^{ty}s Councell for Virginia, heretofore made and granted to me and my heyres, I ame and stande lawfully seysed of, a certaine parcell or quantity of Land scituate in the Countrey of Toppahannah betwene the two Creeks over againste James City in the Contynent or Countrey of of [sic] Virginia:¹⁰ My will and desire is, and I doe hereby devise and ordaine that the said Land or grounde, and all and singuler profitts Co^modities emoluments, Rights, Royalties, Jurisdic^tions and hereditaments whatsoever therevnto belongeinge or in anywise appertayneinge, shall be and shall and may remaine and be vnto my sonne Thomas,¹¹ and to the heyres of his bodye lawfully begotten And I doe hereby give grante and Confirme the same premisses vnto my said sonne accordingly by these presents: And for defalte of such yssue to the vse and behoofe of Elizabeth my daughter,¹² and to the heyres of her body lawfully to be begotten, and for defalte of such yssue, to the vse and behoofe of the Right heyres of the said John Rolfe for ever: Item my will is that if my said sonne shall happen to espouse and marry any wife, by and wth the consent of my said father in Lawe wthin the time of his minority, and before such time as he shall accomlishe the age of one and Twenty yeares, That then vpon such espousall or marryage (by and wth such consent as aforesaid) my said sonne shall or may Enter into and vpon the premisses and every parte thereof and receiue, perceiue and enjoy the Rents yssues Revenues, and profitts thereof and thereby comeinge from thenceforth to his and their owne proper vse and behoofe for ever, And in case my said

¹⁰This grant consisted of 400 acres on the south bank of the James between "Four Mile Tree" and Hog Island. The creeks were probably Gray's Creek and Crouch's Creek. — Hotten, *op. cit.*, p. 270; Argall, Proclamation, March 28, 1619, in Alexander Brown, *The First Republic in America* (Boston, 1898), p. 287; map in Lyon G. Tyler, *The Cradle of the Republic* (Richmond, 1906), p. 200.

¹¹The only child of Pocahontas, probably born in Virginia. (Smith mentioned him in the famous letter to Queen Anne, written early in 1616 at about the time of Rolfe's arrival in England. See Brown, *Genesis*, II, 784, 797n.) The baby was with his parents in England when they started the return trip to Virginia, but after his mother's death his father made the voyage without him. Shortly after his arrival in Jamestown, John Rolfe, fearing censure for seeming to neglect his son, wrote an explanation to Sir Edwin Sandys. The child had been ill during the trip from Gravesend to Plymouth, and there Sir Lewis Stukeley, vice-admiral of Devon, had "most earnestly intreated to have the keeping" of the child until his uncle, Henry Rolfe, might take charge of him. On the advice of Argall, the father had yielded to the suggestion of his friend, and now requested that the "liberal stipend" granted to Pocahontas by the Company might be continued to her son, the "lyving ashes of his deceased Mother," and petitioned Sandys to "remember me for some comaund and some estate of land to be confirmed to me and my childe." He further reported that he found the Indians "very lovinge," his wife's death "much lamented" by them, his "childe much desyred, when it is of better strength to endure so hard a passage."

After being educated in England, Thomas Rolfe did return to Virginia, where he was living in 1641. In that year he asked Governor William Berkeley's permission to visit his "Aunt Cleopatre and his kinsman Opechancanough," who had given him a tract of land near Smith's Fort, on the south side of the James opposite Jamestown and in the vicinity of the "Toppahannah" lands received from his father's estate. It was Opechancanough who organized the massacres of 1622 and 1644; after the latter massacre, when Governor Berkeley led the colony in a war of retaliation against the Indians, Lt. Thomas Rolfe was given command of Fort James. He was a man of standing in the colony, and through his daughter, Jane, who married a Virginian, Robert Bolling, he had many descendants among the leading families, the most eminent of them John Randolph of Roanoke. — Kingsbury, *op. cit.*, III, 70-73.

¹²Listed in the Muster of January, 1625, as a child four years old, born in Virginia, then living with her mother and stepfather, Captain Roger Smith. Hotten, *op. cit.*, pp. 174, 223.

sonne¹³ shall happen to dye and departe this present life on this side and before such time as he shall or may accomlishe the full age of one and Twenty yeares, or be espoused and maryed as aforesaid: Then my said daughter vpon her Accomplishment of the full age of one and Twenty yeares or vpon her espousall and mariage wth consent of my said father in Lawe shall or may lawfully Enter into and vpon the premisses, and receive perceiue and enioye the Rents yssues revenues and profitts thereof or thereby comeinge groweinge or ariseinge from thenceforth to her owne proper vse and behoofe for ever: Item whereas by certaine other Letters P[atent] heretofore sufficiently passed and made there is given granted and confirmed vnto me and my heyres amonge others, a certaine quantity or porçon of Land or grounde wth thappurtenances scituat lyeinge and beinge neare Mulberry Iland¹⁴ in the Country or Continent of Virginia I doe give bequeath and dispose the same as followeth

vizt to the vse and behoofe of Joane my wife¹⁵ dureinge the tearme of her or I sic¹⁶ naturall Life, and from and after her decease to the vse and behoofe [of]

Elizabeth my daughter and to the heyres and Assignes of the said Elizabeth for ever Item as toucheinge and concerneing all and singuler such personall estate, goodes, Chattles, Cattles and householdstufte as god hath Lent me (my debts and funerall charges beinge deducted and payed) my will and desire is that the [sic] shall or may be equally and proportionately shared distributed and devided into three equall and indifferent partes and porçons vnto betwene and amonges Joane my said wife, Thomas my sonne, and Elizabeth my daughter, and that each of them, shall or may have, hold, and enioy one full and Entire thirde parte of and in the said goods Chattles, Cattles and householdstufte severally to their severall vses and behoofes for ever; Provided alwayes that if eyther of my said Children shall happen to dy or departe this present life, before they shall accomlishe the age of Twenty and one yeares, and before such their espousalls and mariage wth such consent as aforesaid, Then my will and desire is that the parte and porçon of the said Child soe deceaseinge, (of and in the said good Chattles Cattles and housholdstufte[]) shalbe and remaine to the survivo^r of my said Children; And alsoe that if both of my said Children shall happen to dye and departe this present life before their accomplishment of their severall ages or their mariages: Then my will and desire is that the severall partes and porçons of my said Children, of and in the said laste mençoned premisses shalbe and remayne vnto my said wife (if she shalbe then liveinge) And yf she shall happen to dye or departe this present life before my said Children: Then the same last mençoned premisses shalbe & remaine vnto my said father in Lawe, To his owne proper vse and behoofe for ever. Item my will and desire is and I doe hereby ordaine and appointe; That my said father in Lawe shall or may in the meane

¹³End of the first page and beginning of the second. "Said sonne" is the catch phrase.

¹⁴A peninsula on the north side of the James River, about fifteen miles below Jamestown Island. By 1624 the Company had issued patents for 1700 acres of land "nere" the island to Rolfe, Pierce, and "some others," and in 1625 Captain Pierce and thirty of his company were living there. — Hotten, *op. cit.*, pp. 238, 271.

¹⁵The daughter of William Pierce, who came to Virginia with her mother in the *Blessing*, probably in the summer of 1610. After Rolfe's death, she married Captain Smith. — Hotten, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-24; Brown, *First Republic*, p. 132.

¹⁶*Originale sic*. Refers to the omission of "of" before Elizabeth.

time have and take the severall parts & porçons of my said Children of and in the said goods Chattles Cattles and housholdstuffe into his owne hands, and at his best descretion to dispose of them to their best advantage vntill they shall accomlishe their severall ages/ Item I give and bequeath unto my said father in Lawe William Pyers my three bullocks or Oxen w^{ch} nowe are and heretofore have bin vsually yoaked or putt to drawe in the yoake. And alsoe my best sworde and girdle and hangers and my best Armo^r; Item I give and bequeath vnto my said wife (to her owne proper vse and behoofe) all the benefitt profit Comodity and advantage to be had gotten or obtained for or by the Labo^r travayle or paines takeinge of my three servants dureinge all the Residue of the time of their service, due vnto me by any Covenant promise or contracte, from them or any of them heretofore made vnto me: Item I give and bequeath vnto my servant Roberte Davyes¹⁷ Twenty Pounds of Lawfull money of England To be payed him in such Money or in good and Marchantable Wares¹⁸ amounetinge to such a value att the Ende and Expiraçon of Two yeares from hence next ensueinge and fully to be compleate: Item I doe make and ordaine my said father in Lawe to be the Executo^r of this my Will and Testament, In witness whereof I have herevnto sett my hand and seale yeaven¹⁹ the day and yeare firste abovewritten./

Sealed and delivered published and declared for and as the Laste Will and Testament of the said John Rolfe²⁰ in the presence of

TEMPERANCE YEARDLEY²¹

RICH: BUCKE²²

JOHN CARTWRIGHT

ROBT. DAVYS

JOHN MILWARDE./

¹⁷One of the witnesses to this will.

¹⁸End of the page. "Wares" is the catchword.

¹⁹Archaic form of "given."

²⁰The name is in another hand, presumably Rolfe's.

²¹The five names following are all signatures on this probate copy. Lady Yeardley was the wife of Sir George.

²²One of the first ministers sent out by the Company, "a verie good preacher," who took part in all the important events in the life of John Rolfe and of the colony while both men lived there. He left England with the Third Supply, on the *Sea-Venture*. In Bermuda he was busy with prayer meetings twice a day and a formal sermon on Sundays, with christenings, a marriage and funeral services. In February of 1610 he baptized Rolfe's daughter, Bermuda. When the *Patience* and the *Deliverance* arrived at Jamestown, he offered the formal prayer of thanksgiving, and upon the arrival of Lord Delaware's fleet, preached an impressive sermon in the chapel. Using the Church of England ritual, he performed the ceremony at the most celebrated wedding in Colonial times — the marriage of Rolfe and Pocahontas. At the first session of the House of Burgesses, held in the church which had recently been built for him, he opened the meeting with prayer. He married in Virginia, patented and planted 750 acres of land in the Corporation of James City, and died there before 1625, possibly one of the casualties of the massacre of 1622. — William Strachey, *True Repertory of the Wracke . . .*, in Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes* (Glasgow, 1905-7), XIX, 5ff; Hotten, *op. cit.*, p. 270; Brown, *First Republic, passim*; brief sketch in Brown, *Genesis*, II, 835.

Concordat[a] cū[m] original[i] facta collac[i]ōne per nos [signed:] Edm: Browne[,] Geo: Puleston[,] 2jmo Maij 1630[.] Recepi test[ament]ūm original[e] in vsum executoris [signed:] Edm: Browne servus M[agist]rī Geers.²³

Probatū[m] fuit testamentum suprascriptum] apud London coram Mag[ist]ro Thoma Bennett legum d[o]c[t]ore Surrō[gato] & [venerabilis viri D(omi)ñi Henrici Martin militis legum etiam doctoris Curie Prerogative Cant(uariensis) mag(ist)rī Custodis sive Commissarij l(egi)time constituti] vicesimo primo die mens[i]s Maij Anno d[omi]ñi 1630. Juramento Willi[a]mi Pyers executoris & [in eodem testamento nominati] Cui & [commissa fuit administratio omnium et singulorum bonorum bonorum (*sic*) urium et creditorum dicti defuncti] de bene & [et fideliter administrando eadem ad sancta de(i) Evangelia] Jurat[o]

Fides p[ro] In:[venta]rīo²⁴

²³Agreements with original made by collation by us Edm: Browne, Geo: Puleston, 21 May 1630. I have received the original Will to the use of the executor [Signed] Edm: Browne servant of Mr. Geers.

²⁴[Was] proved [the Will above written] at London before Mr. Thomas Bennett, Doctor of Laws, Surrogate [to the Venerable man Sir Henry Marten, Knight and Doctor of Laws Master Keeper or Commissary of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury legally constituted] the twenty first day of the month of May, in the year of our Lord 1630 by the oath of William Pyers executor [in the same will named,] to whom [was committed the administration of all and singular the goods goods (*sic*) rights and credits of the said deceased,] being sworn [on God's Holy Gospels] to well [and truly administer the same.]

[St.] Faith's [Day, Oct. 6] for
[exhibiting] the Inventory

The major insertions in this paragraph are from the Registered copy. The interpretation of the final Latin phrase is Mr. Leslie Hotson's. The transcriber takes this opportunity of thanking Miss P. W. Shield and Mr. Francis Berkeley for assistance in transcription. The late Walter A. Montgomery assisted materially in the translating.