

2. ANTECEDENTS IN OLD VIRGINIA

Following an often tenuous sequence of public records and family papers, we have traced our patrilineal roots across the generations to the opening decades of the eighteenth century in the Virginia Tidewater.

Civil records in Prince George County and Bristol Parish vestry accounts suggest that our family in that day were tobacco planters of modest circumstances. Unfortunately, for the purposes of our story, no historian has yet written a satisfactory account of the lives, thoughts, and feelings in these early days of the social classes below the gentry.¹

Tobacco planting was never easy. It required ‘a great deal of trouble in the right management of it.’ It was expert, labor-intensive, and tricky at all times. A plant had to be ‘topped,’ using the thumbnail. You could always tell a 17th-century tobacco farmer by his hard, green-stained thumb. Everyone worked hard, at any rate in those early days. The laborers and indentured servants did a twelve- to fourteen-hour day, with Saturday afternoon free and Sunday.²

Our earliest known progenitor to leave a record which has survived to the present day is one Samuel Sentall who probably arrived in the colony as a young man in 1700 among a group of destitute Huguenot refugees. He may have indentured himself for his maintenance during the first years in Virginia, and he probably went into debt for some necessities at that time.

He married his wife Jane probably about 1710 as their son Samuel was born about 1711 (since he had children in 1729 and 1734) and Anne (who could be their daughter) was born about 1713.

Samuel the refugee perhaps intended to enter a small plantation during these years, but an old debt may have delayed his plans. His name first appears in the list of Prince George land surveys made by Robert Bolling between June 1710 and 10 June 1712. On 28 April 1712, Bolling surveyed 400 acres for Samuel Sentall "on both sides of Hatchers Run below Richard Hudson's Land."³

¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, **The Americans: The Colonial Experience** (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 391.

² Paul Johnson, **A History of the American People** (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2009), p. 58.

³ Benjamin B. Weisiger III, **Prince George County, Virginia Wills and Deeds 1713-1728** (Richmond: 1973), pp. 90-91; Cites **Prince George County (Virginia) Records**, p. 750.

On deeds recorded 4 February 1714/1715 and 8 February 1714, Samuel Sentall (Sentall) and Mathew Mayes witnessed the transfer of two hundred-acre holdings from Matthew (Mathew) Anderson, Jr., to Robert Munford.⁴

A Civil Action

Samuel apparently had the means by now to take up some land in his own right, but some of his creditors must have come forward at this time to press their claim for debts incurred in his earlier years in the colony. On 13 September 1715, judgment was entered against him for one pound eight shillings.

Att a Court held for the County of Prince George on the Second Tuesday in September Anno Domini 1715. being the thirteenth Day of the said month.⁵

* * * * *

**Present Jn^o Hamelin & John Peterson Gent. Justices. --
In the action of Debt Depending between Charles Anderson
Surviving Executor of the last Will and Testament of Sarah
Boisseau Deced: who was Executrix of the Last Will and
Testament of James Boisseau Deced: plt and Samuelli Sentall
Deft for Nine pounds thirteen Shillings Due b Bill Vis: for Sundry
Apparrell or the said apparrell in kind, the Deft haveing pleaded
to the plt -- Declaration and he replying and Demurring thereto
and the s^d Deft -- Joining in the said supplicaTion and Demurrer
the same was Submitted to the Court for Tryall and the Deft
Exhibiting into Court a Discount (upon Oath) of four pounds five
Shillings, and also Delivering to the plt Sundry of the s^d
Apparrell above mentioned amounting to the Sum of four
pounds, Judgement is thereupon granted the plt against the
said Deft for the residue of the aforesaid Sum of Nine pounds
thirteen Shillings, the Same being One pound Eight Shillings,
together with Costs. Als: Exec: --⁶**

The events which led to the judgment against Samuelli Sentall must have transpired several months and probably years earlier as both Boisseau and his widow had died in the interim. Since Boisseau could have died as early as 1705,

³ Weisiger, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5; Cites **Prince George County Records**, pp. 43-44. Both dates would be 1715 by the modern calendar. All dates are Old Style.

⁴ Tuesday, 24 September 1715, by modern reckoning.

⁵ Anderson v. Sentall, **Prince George County Orderbook 1714-1720** (Archives Division, Virginia State Library), p. 32.

Sentall might have been in Virginia by that year or even earlier. This places him close to the turn of the century and the time of the Huguenot immigration into the colony.

With the persistent tradition of French antecedents in the family, we might also question whether this incident linking an ancestor with a minister of Huguenot extraction is more than coincidence.

James Boisseau. The original creditor, James Boisseau, was an Episcopalian minister who died between 1705 and 1715. His parents were Huguenots associated with the Protestant university at Montauban, below Toulouse in the Garonne valley, who fled to England upon Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. James entered the ministry in England and after several years emigrated to Virginia.⁷ In the Oxford Library is a receipt he signed in November 1689 for money as an emigrant minister to the colony.⁸

James Boisseau served St. Peter's Parish in New Kent County, and beginning about 1705 a Prince George County parish, probably Martin's Brandon.

In common with other Anglican ministers of the times, he ran afoul of at least one colonial vestry jealous to maintain its prerogatives. We must remember there was no separation of church and state during the colonial period.

The unfortunate Rev. Boisseau also found himself locked out of his church, and a vestry maintained him in trial status by annual election instead of recommending him to the governor as required for permanent induction to his post.⁹

The judgment. The judgment against Samuell Sentall was considerably less than the original claim, but one pound eight shillings still represented a sizeable amount for that currency-starved time and place. When Samuell finally got around to buying his plantation seven years later, he paid only twelve shillings more than this sum for 400 acres of land. But land was cheap.

The actual value of the judgment is difficult to fix in terms of human time and labor. The period was one of extreme inflation, at least in tobacco prices, and therefore highly favorable to a debtor. In 1710 tobacco brought one penny per pound, up from a quarter-penny in 1706. At this rate, the full claim against

⁶ "The Boisseau Family," **Tyler's Quarterly**, 10: 118-130, October, 1928; 280-283, April, 1929.

⁷ Mrs. W. A. Porter, "Boisseau," **The Huguenot**, No. 11 (1941-1943), 83- 84.

⁸ "The Boisseau Family," *loc. cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Samuell would have been equivalent to 2,316 pounds of tobacco, and the final judgment against him would have bought 336 pounds of tobacco.

In 1715, however, the average market price had jumped to two shillings per pound, and Sentall could have settled with the Boisseau estate for only fourteen pounds of tobacco. Or if he delayed payment a year until 1716, he could have settled with only two or three pounds when tobacco jumped to eleven shillings.¹⁰

Land Entry on Hatcher Run

Robert Bolling once again surveyed 400 acres of land for Samll Sentall on 10 April 1722, "One fifth Parts fitt for Cultavation . . . Lying on boath Sides of Hatchers Run in Prince George County."¹¹ Ostensibly this was the same land he had surveyed for Sentall ten years before. We wonder if the surveyor charged again for the same work.

This parcel was registered to Samuel Sentall by the Land Office on 22 June "in consideration of the Sum of forty Shillings of good and lawful mony [*sic*]." The patent describes the property as lying adjacent to that of Richard Hudson with bounds "Beginning at a corner shrub white oak of Richard Hudson by the side of a slash on the North Side of the Said run."¹²

As a matter of passing interest, we have attempted to identify the location of this first known land holding of our family. The site would have to satisfy three conditions. (1) The recurrence of certain proper names and descriptions of other land entered on and before 22 June suggests that the Sentall grant was close to Whipponock and Namozine Creeks.¹³ Since these streams flow northeasterly to the Appomattox River while Hatcher Run follows a southeasterly course to

¹⁰ Melvin Herndon, **Tobacco in Colonial Virginia "The Sovereign Remedy"** (Williamsburg: 300th Anniversary Celebration Corporation, 1957), p. 48.

¹¹ **Prince George County Surveyor's Plat Book 1711-24** (Archives Division, Virginia State Library), p. 62.

¹² **Virginia Land Patents, No. 11, 1719-1724** (Archives Division, Virginia State Library), p. 124.

¹³ Some fifty patents were issued for Prince George land on the same day as the Sentall grant. Richard Hudson on 22 June entered new land adjoining Hall Hudson, John Ellington, John Spain, and Ragsdell's line. Hall Hudson entered property on this date lying on both sides of Ellington's Bridge at John Ellington's corner. John Spain entered land on the west side of Mawhipponock Creek adjoining William Anderson and Maize's line. A 1717 deed to John Ellington describes a holding at Ellington's Bridge of Namusend Creek. Additional land was granted to John Ellington in 1723 between Mawhipponock and Nummisseen Creeks adjoining Ragsdell's corner and Spain's line.

Rowanty Creek, the plantation must have been located fairly high on the run.¹⁴ (2) The profile of Hatcher Run should approximate the watercourse on the plat map drawn by surveyor Bolling. And, finally, (3) the land should be located within the bounds of the new Bath Parish established in 1742, that is to say, east of a line beginning one mile west of Petersburg and extending southwesterly to Stony Creek.¹⁵ The family probably resided in the new parish as their frequent mention in the records of the old Bristol Parish ends abruptly at the time of the division.

One site alone satisfies all three conditions, and it lies immediately west of the U. S. Highway No. 1 bridge over Hatcher Run. Nine miles southwest of Petersburg and six to eight miles east of Five Forks, this location lies within the present-day Fort Lee Recreation Area. And for the most part the old home place, perhaps our first in America, now lies hidden by the waters of Jordan Lake.

Bristol Parish Records

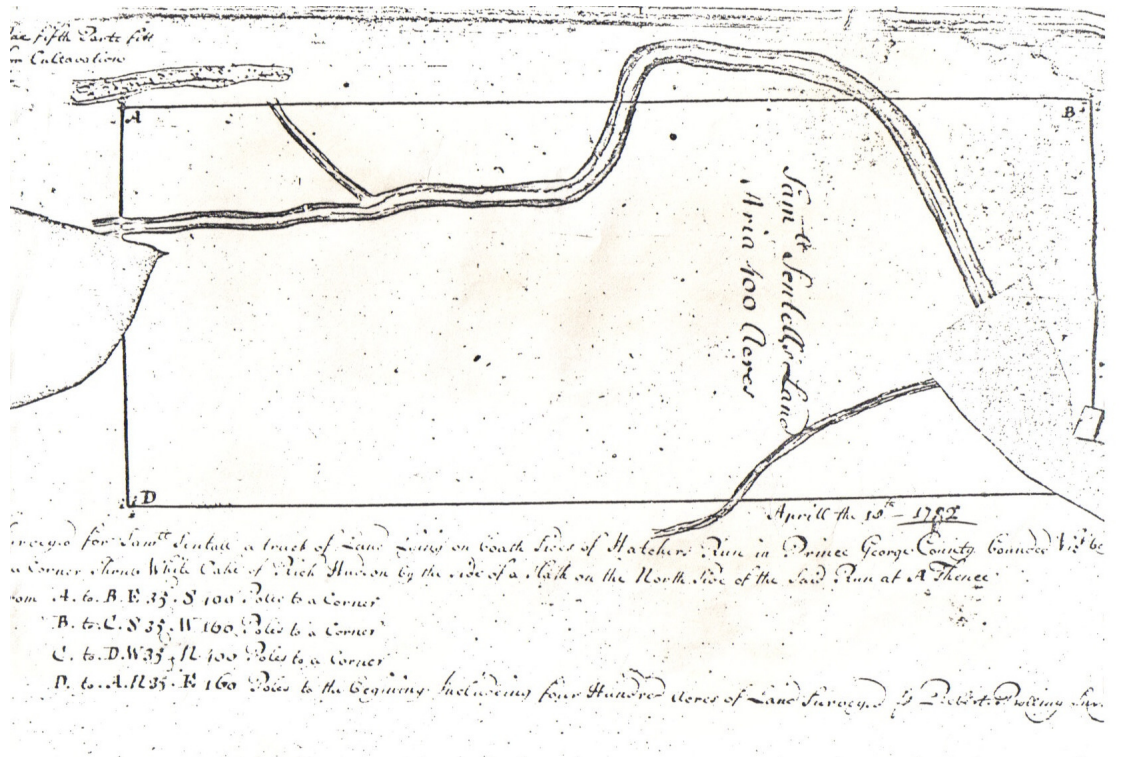
Samuel by this time perhaps had seen his better years. On 26 May 1726 he appeared before the parish vestry and obtained a disability waiver from his church levy.

**Samuel sental being an oald Man ane Veary Much afflicted
with pains In his feet So y^t he Is not able to work for his living
as Useal humbly Seweth to this Vestry y^t he may be Acquitted
from paying Leavy
tis granted.¹⁶**

¹⁴ Nearby is the site of the Battle of Five Forks which during the Civil War era marked the beginning of the fall of Petersburg.

¹⁵ Charles Francis Cocke, **Parish Lines of Southern Virginia** (Richmond: The Virginia State Library, 1964), p. 80; Philip Slaughter D. D., **A History of Bristol Parish, Virginia** (2nd Ed. Richmond, Virginia: J. W. Randolph & English, 1879), p. xviii.

¹⁶ Churchill Gibson Chamberlayne, **The Vestry Book and Register of Bristol Parish, Virginia, 1720-1789** (Richmond: C. G. Chamberlayne, 1898), pp. 27-28. The old runic letter **thorn** for the **th** sound is here transcribed as **y** following common practice. Thus, "yth" should be read as **that**, and "ye" as **the**.



Pr. George County Surveyor's Plat Book 1711-24, p. 52

Some may suppose that in the battle for survival and solvency on Hatcher Run our ancestor had worked himself by now to exhaustion and an early old age. But overwork, to our knowledge, has never been a family failing. No doubt the pain was real, as most feet hurt sooner or later. And most likely, as his descendants have continued to do across the generations, he simply recognized a good opportunity and took advantage of it.

In any event, relieved and released as he was from the heavy labor of tobacco farming, Samuel Sental now had time for less demanding work. Between 1732 and 1742 when the parish divided, Samuel and Jane were keepers of the church building.

Custodial services for the parish. The **Vestry Book** record shows payments of 250 pounds (tobacco) to Jane Sental for cleaning the Ferry Chapel in 1732, 1733, and 1734. This was a wooden structure near the Appomattox River at present-day Petersburg. In 1735 a custodial cost of 290 pounds was recorded for the Ferry Chapel, 145 pounds each to Jane Sental and to John Bently, Sexton. In 1736, Jane Sental received again the full 250 pounds for cleaning the Ferry Chapel.

In 1734 the vestry ordered construction of a brick church on Well's Hill. This building, still standing and known today as Old Blandford Church in

Petersburg, was first occupied in August 1737. Payments of 250 pounds to Samuel Sental, Sr., for cleaning the brick church were recorded each year from 1737 through 1742. In 1742 when the parish was subdivided, Samuel Sental was discharged as sexton of the brick church, and Abraham Alley was named to the position in his place.¹⁷

The common denominators of time, place, and work all suggest that Jane and Samuel Sental, Sr., were husband and wife, and they must have been advanced in years if he was the "oald Man" excused from the levy in 1726.

Jane disappears from the record after 1736. Perhaps the vestry in that unliberated age wanted a man to care for the new brick church, but if they felt the work was harder or the responsibility greater they neglected to increase the appropriation for this purpose. More likely, Jane Sental had been overtaken by death or infirmity by 1737. Perhaps her health had begun to fail in 1735 when part of the work was done by John Bently.

Old Blandford then and now. Old Blandford took its name in later years from the community which grew up around it. The building was abandoned in 1806 for religious services, but a century later, in 1901, it was restored as a Confederate memorial. The old church remains a major point of interest in the area today complete with its own museum and a resident historian and staff.

Changes in later years. Despite its fortunate preservation, the church has changed notably since Samuel Sental served as its first sexton. A wing and the brick wall around the churchyard were completed about 1752, a decade after Samuel had been discharged from his post. And the famous Tiffany windows were not added until the restoration in our own century.

The church at nearby Merchant's Hope probably resembles more closely the building known to the Sental family. Built in 1657 and still in use as a place of worship, the 60-foot by 25-foot dimensions of the Merchant's Hope church are identical to those of the original Old Blandford building.

¹⁷ Chamberlayne transcribes Abraham **Allen** at this entry (p. 109), but the name appears elsewhere as Abraham **Alley** or **Ally**.



Old Blandford Church

Wing and brick wall completed about 1752.
(Ink sketch by Joseph Bernard Miller III in 1970.)

A ward of the parish. The Bristol Parish records mention the Sentall family in connection with one Peter Plantine, an aged ward of the parish who had been disabled by an accidental burn in 1727 or before. Payments were made by the vestry each year from 1727 through 1739 to various persons for the maintenance of Plantine, and he may have died in 1739 as he disappears from the records after that year. Samuel Sentall, Jr., was paid for keeping Plantine in 1735 and 1738, and in between in 1736 and 1737 Samuel Sentall, Sr., received a subsidy from the parish for Plantine.¹⁸

A Circumstantial Link

The designations **junior** and **senior** have not always indicated a father and son kinship between two persons of the same name, but the terms at one time merely distinguished between the younger and the elder. Yet we have no reason to question that Samuel Sentall, Jr., was indeed the son of Samuel the "oald Man" and his wife Jane.

The family name was a rare one in Bristol Parish and Prince George County. And the frequency with which Samuel, Jr. and Sr., appear in the official records gives some cause to believe that others of the family, had they been living in that time and place, would have rated at least passing mention. But there

¹⁸ Chamberlayne, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

are no others so far as we can tell, and consequently there are no candidates for the paternity of Samuel, Jr., apart from the elder Samuel and Jane.¹⁹

¹⁹ See the INDEX in Chamberlayne (p. 414): Sental(l) (Sintale), Ann, Hen. Fitz 366; Jas. 64; Jane 63, 67, 71, 73, 78, 80, 83-4, 366; Jonathan 364; Mary 364, 366; Rich'd 107, 115-6, 118, 120-1, 123; Sam'l 27, 79-81, 83-4, 86-7, 90-1, 94-5, 99, 100, 104-5, 107-9, 364, 366.

