

Nathaniel Gordon and The Town of Gordonsville

From: Historian Ann Miller and her book *Antebellum Orange*:

“The site of the present town of Gordonsville was originally part of a patent for 10,000 acres granted to Col Henry Willis of Fredericksburg in 1728. Later that same year, Col. Willis sold a portion of the land to Ambrose Madison, grandfather of the President. The property remained in the family until 1787, when Ambrose Madison’s granddaughter Ann Beale Willis, and her husband John Whittaker Willis (grandson of the original grantee), sold it to Nathaniel Gordon, son of Col. James Gordon of Lancaster County.

“The 1,350 acres purchased by Gordon included the crossroads of the Fredericksburg Road and the Richmond Road; Gordon built his house at the crossroads, and, quick to sense an opportunity, was running a tavern there by 1794. His plantation/tavern complex soon became a stage stop as well, and Gordon’s business and his fortunes expanded.

“Gordon had called his property Newville, but in 1813, when a Post Office was established there, with Gordon the first postmaster, it was being called Gordonsville. Following Gordon’s death in 1820, the tavern was leased for nearly a decade. It finally passed out of the Gordon ownership in 1830, when it ceased operation as a tavern and became a private residence.

“In 1840, the Louisa Railroad (now the C&O) reached Gordonsville, making it the westernmost railhead in Virginia at that time, and beginning the town’s forty-year reign as the trade center for the area. A business and mercantile area, called Gordonsville Depot, grew up around the old Gordon Inn. The portion of the old Gordon plantation between these settlements was owned by Dr. Charles Beale, son-in-law of Nathaniel Gordon. Dr. Beale, envisioning a unified town, planned to subdivide his property into lots. His early death prevented him from carrying out his plans, but in his will in 1853 he directed that local surveyor Dr. George S. Newman should ‘come down immediately after he plants his corn’ and lay the Beale farm into lots for the widowed Mrs. Gordon Beale to sell.

“Gordonsville’s economic and trade importance further increased with the construction of the Blue Ridge Turnpike and the extension of the Orange & Alexandria Railroad to Gordonsville in the early and mid-1850’s.

“The crossroads and rail exchange at Gordonsville gave it strategic importance during the Civil War. Northern troops made several attempts to capture the town, but never succeeded. One of the major Confederate receiving hospitals was located at Gordonsville with the Exchange Hotel, as well as other buildings, pressed into service as surgery and hospital rooms.

“The town was incorporated in 1870. In the 1880’s, the new Virginia Midland rail line (now the Southern), running directly between Orange and Charlottesville, siphoned off much of Gordonsville trade to depots at Barboursville and Somerset. Short-lived land booms in the 1890’s failed, and Gordonsville became a quiet rural town. Two fires in the early 20th century destroyed part of the downtown business district, but left the residential section of Gordonsville untouched, and the success of Dr. Beale’s plan and prosperity of the town’s heyday of 1840-1880 can still be seen in the many fine buildings that survive from those years.”¹

Below is a photo of the house and tavern of Nathaniel Gordon that sat at the crossroads of Fredericksburg and Richmond Roads.² The photo, courtesy of the Virginia State Library was provided by William H.B. Thomas in his book, *Gordonsville, Virginia*.³



Nathaniel Gordon's Tavern

(Courtesy of Virginia State Library)

¹ Ann L. Miller, *Antebellum Orange* (Orange, Virginia: Moss Publication, 1988), 41.

² William H.B. Thomas, *Gordonsville, Virginia* (Orange, Virginia: Green Publishers, Inc., 1971), ii.

³ *Ibid.*

More information on Nathaniel Gordon from historian William H.B. Thomas in his book, *Gordonsville, Virginia--Historic Crossroads Town*:

In 1787 Nathaniel Gordon purchased 1,350 acres at the foot of the Southwest Mountains previously owned by a cousin of James Madison who had first acquired it in 1728. The property contained the crossroads of two frequently travelled roads of the era:

- "The Fredericksburgh Great Road," a stage route from Charlottesville through Orange to Fredericksburg; and
- "The Richmond Road," which led from the Virginia capital, through Louisa, and west over the Blue Ridge Mountains into the Shenandoah Valley.

Sitting at this crossroads made owning a tavern a good business opportunity, and by 1794 Gordon had been granted a license for a tavern or ordinary. At the time of the purchase, Gordon was 24 years old and had recently married.⁴

Gordon had been baptized in 1763 by James Waddell, his-brother-in-law. Waddell later became known as the Blind Preacher whose Presbyterian church was situated about one-half mile east of Gordon's Tavern.⁵

Across the road from the tavern was a sixteen foot square one-story house with a front porch and two sheds, one on the side and one in the rear of the house. This MAY have been Gordon's first house described in one of Gordon's insurance policies as his "Plantation called Newville".⁶

In 1802 Gordon added a two-story residence to the tavern with a chimney and a porch supported by brick pillars. This building was known as Gordon's Tavern or Gordon Tavern and more recently as Gordon Inn. It stood at the crossroad until it was demolished in 1947.

Gordon's Tavern was also a stagecoach stop.⁷ "The tavern's fare and accommodations, beginning with the taprooms's offerings, were posted in the public entertaining room for guests to consult upon their arrival after a hot, dusty ride in summer or a cold, muddy ride in winter. Such a listing was known as a bill of rates and was set annually by the County Court. Failure to have it posted was an offense, one with which Gordon was charged in 1803."⁸ In addition to a hot meal, there was lodging for the guests, a stable for horses with hay, fodder, corn, oats and pasture available.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

The tavern hosted many well-known figures of the post-Revolutionary War era: Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, James and Philip Pendleton Barbour, John Randolph of Roanoke, William Cabell Rives, Rev. James Waddell and probably James Madison. All have been documented to have stopped at the tavern except for Washington.⁹ Jefferson called Gordon Tavern, “a good house”.¹⁰ Further, Major General Marquis de Lafayette of France visited the tavern on November 19, 1824, during his triumphal tour of America in 1824-25.¹¹ Lafayette had been visiting Jefferson at Monticello and was on his way to visit Madison at Montpelier. Gordon himself had died four years previously in 1820, but the tavern had been leased and business continued over several years as his estate was settled.

Gordonsville was the name of Gordon’s plantation and the name had been in use since 1813 when Gordon had been appointed the first postmaster at “Gordonsville”.¹² At the time of his death in 1720, Gordonsville included his house and tavern, sheds and other dependencies and a store. When his estate was settled in 1828, his land was divided in part by purchase among his heirs.¹³

At this time Main Street in Gordonsville was known as the Richmond-Swift Run Gap road. John Gordon, Nathaniel Gordon’s son, bought the tavern, residence, dependencies and 250 acres of land on and east of Richmond-Swift Run Gap. An adjoining 250 acres on both sides of Richmond-Swift Run Gap and extending south became the property of Dr. Charles Beale, husband of Gordon’s daughter, Mary Harrison Gordon. Dr. Beale and Mary established their house on the side of the crossroads opposite the tavern.¹⁴

The name Gordonville has since remained as the town expanded.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Gordon Inn Marker



Photo courtesy of Linda Carlton

The Inscription:

"Built by Nathaniel Gordon, 1787. Visited by Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Philip and James Barbour, Clark, Rives, Randolph, Wirt, Waddell, and other celebrities of Revolutionary, post-Revolutionary, and Confederate War periods. Lafayette made an address from the porch. Old stage junction and night stop ovation to Lee near by Jackson Headquarters."¹⁵

In 1928 the marker was built as part of the Daughters of the American Revolution series and the United Daughters of the Confederacy series.¹⁶ It was placed at the southeast corner of the traffic circle (the old Richmond/Fredericksburg crossroads) in Gordonsville close to the location of the original Gordon Inn built by Nathaniel Gordon.



Photo Courtesy of Linda Carlton

¹⁵ Author unknown. "Gordon Inn". *Historical Marker Project*, Google, April 17, 2017, https://historicalmarkerproject.com/markers/HM2MR_gordon-inn_Gordonsville-VA.html

¹⁶ *Ibid.*