



The Old Stone House

[<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/wash/dc17.htm>]

THE OLD STONE HOUSE IN WASHINGTON, D.C. & GERMAN-AMERICAN CHRISTOPHER LEHMAN

The Old Stone House, located at 3051 M Street in the Georgetown neighborhood of the District of Columbia, is the oldest building in the nation's capital. It is situated on the north side of M between 30th Street (formerly Washington St.) and 31st Street (formerly Congress St.). Directly south of the Old Stone House, Thomas Jefferson Street enters M Street; here Jefferson had his lodgings when he was Vice President. M Street was earlier called Bridge Street after the bridge that was built around 1800 over Rock Creek, three blocks to the east. Pennsylvania Avenue coming from the White House about fourteen blocks to the east turns into M Street just before the Old Stone House. About seven blocks west of the Old Stone House, M Street becomes Canal Road and passes the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal on the left and Georgetown University (founded 1789) on the right. Today the building is preserved and maintained by the Federal government as the sole remaining pre-revolutionary structure in Washington, D.C. As such, it is older than either the White House or the Capitol.¹

The Old Stone House was built on lot 3 of the original eighty lots which constituted colonial George Town as surveyed in 1751. The original boundaries of Georgetown were lot 3 on the east, approximately N Street on the north, 34th Street on the west and the Potomac River on the south. The Old Stone House was thus near the northeast corner of the original settlement. George Town was then part of Frederick County, Province of Maryland. According to public records one "Christopher Layhman" acquired lot 3 on 11 June 1764, from the George Town Commissioners for 1

pound, 10 shillings. The previous owner, John Boone,² had failed to improve it according to the requirements of the Maryland Colonial Assembly and thus forfeited the property.³ Fronting on today's M Street, the lot measured 67 feet 4 ½ inches along the street and 399 feet to the north.⁴ The new owner was a cabinetmaker by trade who had immigrated from Baden in the southwest corner of present-day Germany. His name at birth was Christoph Lehman, the first part of which was anglicized when it was added to the ship's passenger manifest when he emigrated. Variant spellings for surnames were common in the eighteenth century, particularly with names of non-English origin, and there are a number of alternate spellings of the Lehman name along the lines cited above. Lehman began construction almost immediately on the structure now known as the Old Stone House. Although Lehman was able to enjoy the property only briefly, the building itself was used by a succession of residents over the years as both a residence and a place of business.

THE FOUNDING OF GEORGETOWN

Long before the District of Columbia was formed, Georgetown, now Washington's oldest neighborhood, was a separate city that boasted a harbor full of ships and warehouses filled with tobacco. Washington has filled in around Georgetown over the years, but the former tobacco port retains an air of aloofness. Its narrow streets make up the capital's wealthiest neighborhood and are the nucleus of its nightlife.

The earliest settlers in the area which was to be known as Georgetown were the

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Algonquin Indians, who lived in villages along the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. They fished in Rock Creek, raised crops, and hunted in the forest for bison, deer, bear, wild turkey, and smaller animals. Increasing evidence seems to indicate that the first Europeans to explore the Potomac River were the Spanish. For many years prior to English exploration of the area, Spaniards had sailed up the Potomac or the *Espiritu Santo* [Holy Spirit] as they called it, reaching at least as far as the present site of the District of Columbia.

As early as 1703, an Indian trading post was set up on the west bank of Rock Creek where it enters the Potomac. Rock Creek was much wider and deeper than it is today, and its mouth provided anchorage for ocean going vessels. In 1747 the Maryland General Assembly designated George Gordon's "Rolling House" on the west bank of Rock Creek "as an official place of tobacco inspection."⁵ The inspection center served as a collection point for hogsheads of tobacco which were inspected to insure the high quality of exported tobacco. The upsurge in commercial activity also provided the impetus for the sudden growth of the area around the inspection station. George Town was established at the confluence of Rock Creek and the Potomac River in 1751. It was named in honor of George II, King of England and Elector of Hanover. Located just before the falls of the Potomac, it was as far inland as ocean going vessels could sail. It was the nearest overseas shipping point for tobacco farmers in what is now Montgomery County.

In 1762, the Georgetown Commissioners authorized the construction of a wharf at the end of what is today Wisconsin Avenue.⁶ Ships from distant shores made George Town their port of call, bringing

goods from Europe and leaving heavily laden with tobacco.⁷ In 1791, George Washington would call the town the greatest tobacco market of the State, if not of the Union.

CHRISTOPHER LEHMAN

Although it is difficult to say with certainty, it appears that the Christoph Lehman who settled ultimately in Georgetown was born 14 April 1701, in Mönchweiler, Villingen, Baden, to Christian Lehman and his wife Catharina, née Schmaltz. Villingen is located in the southwestern corner of Germany on the eastern slopes of the Black Forest on the Brigach River, which flows a few miles south into the emerging Danube. To the west of the Black Forest is the Rhine, which provided access to Rotterdam.

Christopher arrived in Philadelphia on 21 September 1731, on the ship *Britannia* of London. This vessel, a grand three-master, sailed under Master Michael Franklyn from Rotterdam, a favorite port of embarkation for immigrants from areas along the Rhine. The ship made a stopover in Cowes Harbour, Isle of Wight, Great Britain, to take on supplies. Upon arriving in Philadelphia, Lehman and the 268 other German immigrants on board were received by the Governor and Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania in the Philadelphia Courthouse. There they declared their intention to settle and live peaceably in the Province of Pennsylvania. They also subscribed to the Declaration of Fidelity and Abjuration, whereby they abjured allegiance to their former rulers and fidelity to King George II of England.

We know that Christopher was married to Rachel Lehman, but we don't know if he brought her with him from Germany. The manifest of the *Britannia* lists only men.⁸

Christopher Lehman became a naturalized British citizen in Pennsylvania.⁹ Lehman, who usually spelled his name Layman, probably left Pennsylvania in the early 1760s. The year in which his name appears first in George Town documents is 1764. He may well have initially moved to western Maryland, as did many Germans who arrived in Philadelphia. Then, like so many of his neighbors on the Maryland frontier, Lehman may have brought his family to George Town for protection against Indian attacks during the French and Indian War (1754-1763).

BUILDING THE OLD STONE HOUSE

In 1764, Christopher Lehman began to work on his home and carpentry shop in George Town. He situated the building in the southwest corner of lot 3. As with many immigrants, Lehman took his inspiration from the buildings in other German immigrant settlements and from the buildings in his European homeland. The pitch of the roof is, for example, steeper than that of modern houses in the Washington area. It seems to be modeled on the architectural style in Germany, which has to cope with more snowfall than in the mid Atlantic region. Snow slides more easily from a steep roof, and its weight is less likely to crush such a roof. A steeper roof also provides more head room in the attic.

Using local bluestone Lehman built his house in the manner of Pennsylvania dwellings he had known. Details of the roofline, the stonework, and the brick east gable and chimney resemble the style brought to the colonies by his European

forebears. Like many of his fellow German immigrants, he also preferred to build in stone. Most of the houses of Germantown, a suburb of Philadelphia, the first German settlement in the United States, were of stone.

Lehman, the carpenter-architect, built the house with walls 2 ½ feet thick. This solid construction, typical of German-built houses, is one reason why it has survived 235 years. It is two stories high. The house faces the street with its long side, which runs in an east-west direction parallel to what is now M Street. The chimney is in the right or east-gable end of the house and attached to the outside of the gable wall similar to the way chimneys are attached on log houses. Its lower half is made of stone, and its upper half of bricks. This chimney was used to heat and light Christopher's work area, and it also served as Rachel's cooking hearth. Except for a small closet, the workshop-kitchen takes up the entire ground floor. The floor is covered with bricks. Upstairs are two bedrooms separated by a narrow hallway. Apparently such houses were common in the second half of the eighteenth century. In an article on the house, the *Washington Daily News* in fact states that "[i]ts design was standard among 'carpenter architects'" (8 June 1950).

Unfortunately, Christopher Lehman died in the first days of November 1765, shortly after he had completed his house. The inventory of his possessions is dated 5 November 1765. The inventory of the "goods and chattel of Christopher Leamon late of Frederick County deceased" included such items as:

Inventory

Bed and furniture with trundle bed and blankets, 3 benches, etc.	£ 2	
1 small looking glass		3 shillings
1 large Dutch Bible	£ 1	15 shillings

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1 smaller ditto	£ 1	60 shillings
1 book sermons		60 shillings
2 prayer books		1 shilling 6 pence
Pine Wood		

The pine wood consisted of 811 feet of pine planks, each one inch thick.

The inventory of Lehman's possessions gives witness to his occupation and lifestyle. He was a woodworker and joiner. Apparently he had been fitting together a blanket chest of local walnut at the time of his death. Beyond the supply of pine planks, the tools of his trade—chisels, planer, clampsfigure prominently in the inventory of his possessions. The value of his goods added up to fifty-two English pounds, placing the family in the lower middle class. Like a number of houses of the time, the first floor of his home contained a shop and kitchen; the family lived upstairs. The cast iron stove, listed as the most valuable object in the household, warmed the shop. Rachel's kitchen and her cooking utensils were located in the extension of the house to the north.

Even though the inventory counted every button, one notes that there was only one table along with bedsteads and chests and one towel, but no chairs. On the other hand, there were two Pennsylvania Dutch Bibles. The "Dutch" Bibles were of course actually *Deutsch* or German. One was evidently the Lehman family Bible and the other probably came from Rachel's family.

FURTHER HISTORY OF THE OLD STONE HOUSE AFTER CHRISTOPHER LEHMAN'S DEATH

At the meeting of the town Commissioners on 11 June 1766, lot 3 was listed as being improved with a substantial stone structure by "Rachael Layhman."¹⁰ However, Rachel lived in the Old Stone House for only about two years. The widowed Rachel, who was

left with two sons, married Jacob Purvey before the end of 1766. Rachel and her new husband sold the Old Stone House to Cassandra Chew on 9 June 1767, "in exchange for lot 62 in George Town and the sum of 100 pounds."¹¹ The money was apparently provided by the wealthy merchant and real estate speculator Robert Peter, because the house would revert back to him or his heirs if Cassandra had no heirs. He evidently considered the stone house a fine residence for Cassandra, his mistress.

In the 1770s, Cassandra Chew added a ground floor kitchen and an upstairs parlor and dining room to the back of the stone house, so that it took on an L shape. The architectural form of the rear extension was the same as that of the front building, except that the chimney at the north end was inside the stone wall.

One of Rachel and Christopher's offspring was "John Christopher Layman" who signed a petition to the 1775 Maryland Convention on behalf of one Patrick Graham of Port Tobacco, Charles County. This gentleman had broken the Resolves of the Continental Congress by aiding a certain John Bailie to land secretly and dispose of sundry goods imported by him contrary to the Resolves. The petition stated that Graham was now contrite and determined never more to do anything inimical to American freedom. The 119 petitioners asked the Convention to restore Graham his former rights as a citizen.¹² The fact that Layman was asked to sign this petition shows that he was regarded as a person of some consequence.

At the outbreak of the American Revolution, the population of George Town consisted of 351 free persons plus slaves.¹³ Rachel's husband Jacob Purvey enlisted in the German Regiment during the Revolutionary War. He is listed on 19 September 1776, in Philadelphia as "Private Jacob Fowee."¹⁴ The Council of Maryland awarded more than 200 pounds in *specie*, i.e., coin rather than paper currency, to "Rachel Furry" in 1782.¹⁵ It would seem that Rachel may have lost her second husband in the Revolutionary War and the money may have been her compensation. The 1790 United States Census for Montgomery County, into which George Town had been incorporated in 1776, lists no Jacob Purvey or Furry. It does show a "Charles Fura" living with three other males over 16 plus a slave and a "Thomas Fura" living alone. These were apparently Jacob and Rachel's sons. "John Lehman" or "Lemon" appears four times in the 1790 Census in adjacent Prince George's County, once for each house or dwelling area owned by a person of that name. The Census enumerates the inhabitants by gender and age but doesn't specify their names. It would appear, however, that two of the households in question were those of John Christopher Lehman and his brother and that Rachel lived out her final years with one of her sons with Christopher Lehman.¹⁶

THE STONE HOUSE: A WITNESS TO HISTORY

The Stone House witnessed the rise of a sea-port town and the formative years of the Nation's Capital. It saw the country progress from a colonial possession to an independent republic. By 1785, "flat bot-tomed 'gondolas' brought in many ship-ments of furs, lumber, and flour, and farm produce to the George Town wharves."¹⁷

This western trade extended as far as Fort Osage on the Missouri River, to Lake Erie, and to Mobile, Alabama.¹⁸

The new Capital on the Potomac was authorized by Congress on 16 July 1790. In 1791, the layout of the new city and the location of the chief government buildings were planned in Suter's Tavern in George-town by Charles Pierce L'Enfant, Baron De Graff, and George Washington. Suter's Ta-vern was located three blocks below or south of the Old Stone House. When, in April 1791, the boundaries of the new District of Columbia were laid out, Georgetown was included as Georgetown, District of Columbia, along with Washing-ton, D.C., and Alexandria, D.C.

On 18 September 1793, the corner-stone of the new Capitol was laid by George Washington after a procession from George-town. The Masonic Lodge No. 9 of George-town, known as the Potomac Lodge, played an important role in the procession and cer-emony. The founder and charter Master of the lodge was Charles Frederick Fierer or Karl Friederich Führer, to give his German name. After being captured by Washington at Trenton, he joined the American forces and fought as a major of cavalry. After the war, he settled in Georgetown and published its first newspaper, the *Times*, and the *Patowmack Packet*.¹⁹ During the laying of the cornerstone for the Capitol, the partici-pation of the Masons from the Potomac Lodge was directed by Worshipful Master Valentine Reintzel, who received the trowel from Washington. The headquarters of the Potomac Lodge at this time were one block below the Old Stone House on Thomas Jefferson Street and the C & O Canal. Today the building still overlooks the Canal on the west side of Jefferson Street. The trowel which Reintzel received from President

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Washington is kept in the vault of the bank at the northeast corner of Wisconsin and M Streets.

Around 1793, the Old Stone House passed into the hands of Cassandra Chew's daughters Mary and Harriet, who were the natural children of Robert Peter, the first mayor of George Town. At that point the house and property were valued at \$400.²⁰ In 1800, the house was rented out for a watchmaker's shop.

Meanwhile, the Union Hotel opened in 1796 at Bridge and Washington Streets, a few doors east of the Old Stone House. Alexander Humboldt stayed at the Union when he visited Thomas Jefferson in the White House in 1804. The Bank of Columbia, the first bank in the District of Columbia, was also founded in 1796 and located two blocks west of the Old Stone House. The building still stands today at 3214 M Street. After 1806, the Federal Government established its Indian Trade Office in the building. The Trade Office carried on trade relations between the Government and Indians in the building as late as 1822.²¹ In 1809, the Washington Federalist reported that upwards of 4000 raccoon skins would be sold in the Indian Trade Office in a single day.²² Next to the Bank of Columbia, the City Tavern was established at 3212 M Street. After it opened, Thomas Jefferson patronized it instead of Suter's Tavern. The building is still standing today.

With the move of the federal government to the District of Columbia in 1800, many government officials and diplomats took up lodgings in George Town because it offered more amenities than Washington proper. M Street served then as it does today as the principal artery between Washington and George Town.

On 4 July 1828, President John Quincy Adams turned the first shovelful of earth for the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, which originated in Georgetown and ran one block below the Old Stone House. Although there are no extant records to verify the claim, descendants of Philibert Rodier, Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company engineer and designer of the Wisconsin Avenue Bridge over the canal, maintain that "Rodier and his family resided in the Old Stone House in 1830." Heine, who interviewed the Rodier family believes that the claim is credible.²³ The *Georgetown Directory* of 1830 lists Rodier as residing on Bridge Street near Washington Street.²⁴ The C & O Canal, which Rodier helped plan, was built from Georgetown to Cumberland, Maryland, from 1828 until 1850. The 184.5 miles of the canal run parallel to the Potomac River. They were dug mainly by German and Irish workers, many of whom died of disease in the process.

The Stone House was put to many uses over the years. It was a tailoring establishment, a cobbler's shop, a gunsmith's shop, a printer's establishment, and a painter's and glazer's place of business. In 1959, Park Service historian Cornelius Heine told the Association of Oldest Inhabitants of Washington, that "numerous pieces of type have been found recently in a large stone kiln on the first floor."²⁵ Such evidence makes one wonder whether the Stone House might even have been the print shop for the *Times*, and the *Patowmack Packet* published by Fierer in Georgetown in the 1780s?

THE STONE HOUSE AS HISTORICAL SHRINE

The final commercial use of the Old Stone House was as the office of a used car dealer. When the Old Stone House was about to be torn down in 1950 for a large commercial building, many individuals and

organizations rallied for its preservation. Bill 836 was introduced in Congress in 1950 authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to acquire "a historic building of great pre Revolutionary architectural merit known as the Old Stone House ... containing approximately twenty thousand and forty eight square feet [20,048]." Speaker Rayburn made a rare address to the House of Representatives: "I am very much interested in the passage of this bill, because I think that the few landmarks we have in the United States ought to be preserved as an

inspiration to the generations that are coming...." A building like this "connects the first generation of our freedom and liberty with the present generation and all generations to come."²⁶ The bill was signed into law by President Truman. The Old Stone House was purchased in 1953 by the Federal Government for \$90,000. After the building had been refurbished, the *Georgetowner* predicted, "[t]he old Stone House promises to be one of Georgetown's greatest assets—historically, and architecturally."²⁷

— Gary C. Grassl
Suitland, Maryland

NOTES

- 1 *The Old Stone House* (Pamphlet by Parks and History Association, Washington, D.C., in cooperation with the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1995). Many of the details on the background and history of the Old Stone House cited here are taken from this pamphlet.
- 2 John Boone is believed to have been a relative of Daniel Boone.
- 3 Minutes of the Georgetown Commissioners, 1751-1789, 1: 41 (District of Columbia Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).
- 4 Minutes, 1: 3.
- 5 *The Old Stone House, 1765* (Pamphlet by the National Park Service, Washington, D.C., no date).
- 6 Minutes, 1:39.
- 7 Cornelius W. Heine, *The Old Stone House* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Capital Parks, 1955), 68.
- 8 The Olive Tree Genealogy: Palatine Passenger Lists <<http://www.rootsweb.com/~ote/palshi5.htm>>.
- See also "Britannia" <<http://members.aol.com/niteowl226/Page7.html>>.
- 9 Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, @ 101 @INDI, Christoph Lehman, film 1985463, data as of February 1997 <www.familysearch.org>.
- 10 Minutes of the Georgetown Commissioners, 1751-1789, 1: 42 (District of Columbia Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).
- 11 Liber K folio 1322, Frederick County Land Records, 1748-1778, House of Records, Annapolis, MD.
- 12 Maryland State Archives, (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society) 11: 36.
- 13 1776 Census for Frederick County, Georgetown Hundred, Box 2, Folder 8, Hall Of Records, Annapolis, MD.
- 14 Daniel Wunderlich Nead, *The Pennsylvania Germans in the Settlement of Maryland* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1975), 234.
- 15 Maryland State Archives, (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society) 48: 80, 128.

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- 16 Of the four households, one consisted of one adult male and one female, apparently a husband and wife, and a second of a single male. The remaining two had one man, three boys under 16, three females and two slaves in the first instance and one man, two boys, two females and two slaves in the other.
- 17 Rogers W. Young, *Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Antebellum Commerce of Old Georgetown*, (National Park Service Study, Washington, D.C., January 1940) 2.
- 18 Hugh Taggart, "Old Georgetown," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, XI, 1; 81-182.
- 19 Ray Baker Harris, *Sesqui-Centennial History of The Grand Lodge Free and Accepted Masons, District of Columbia, 1811-1961* (Washington, D.C.: Grand Lodge F.A.A.M. District of Columbia, 1962) 14-20.
- 20 Account of Lots and Houses in Georgetown. Assessment Book 1793-1797, Montgomery County Records.
- 21 Heine, 95.
- 22 Heine, 74.
- 23 C. & O. Canal Records, National Archives, and personal interview by Cornelius W. Heine with descendants of Philibert Rodier. Quoted by Heine, 44.
- 24 *Georgetown Directory*, 1830, Washington, D.C. Public Library (Martin Luther King, Jr. Library), 13.
- 25 *The Washington Evening Star*, 2 April 1959.
- 26 *The Washington Post*, 6 June 1950.
- 27 2 May 1957.