

## COLONEL JOHN FITZGERALD

by Mike McCormack, AOH Historian

In December, 1799, the U.S. lost two great Americans. One was John Fitzgerald, an immigrant from County Wicklow who settled in Alexandria, Virginia in 1769. After his arrival he partnered in a mercantile business of Fitzgerald and Peers with a fellow Irishman. The popular young Irishman was a favorite with local ladies in Alexandria, but found his love in Maryland. In Britain's Virginia colony, Catholics were not accepted, yet on the Maryland side of the Potomac, Jesuits celebrated Mass. There he met Jane Digges, the Catholic daughter of Dr. William Digges of Warburton Manor, whom he would later marry. Warburton Manor is directly across a narrow part of the Potomac river from the Mount Vernon home of George Washington and, as a frequent visitor to the Digges' home, John naturally became friendly with the Washington family. On April 24, 1774, Washington even wrote in his Diary that Mr. Fitzgerald and Dr. Digges dined with him and stayed the night. That August, on a visit to Mount Vernon, John brought his friend Stephan Moylan, an Irish Catholic immigrant like himself, to meet Mr. Washington.

Meanwhile, Britain's harsh reaction to the recent Boston Tea Party included military occupation, closing Boston Harbor and suspending their colonial government. Angry county representatives in Virginia met in Williamsburg to denounce the treatment of Massachusetts. They adopted a boycott of British goods and three months later, the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia did the same. On September 21, 1774, a volunteer militia was also formed called the Fairfax County Independent Company; Fitzgerald was among the first to join. Like most Irish and their descendants, he supported America's dream of independence. When war was declared after Lexington and Concord in April 1775, Washington was chosen Commander in Chief on June 15. He set out for Massachusetts to lead the rag-tag Continental force. When he took command on July 3 in Cambridge, Captain John Fitzgerald of the Third Virginia Regiment was with him. On St. Patrick's Day, 1776, Washington chased the British from Boston to New York. On the historic July 4, 1776, Washington, still in New York, had Fitzgerald write to Congress listing officers that Washington recommended to serve him. Promoted to the rank of Major in the 3rd Virginia Regiment on 3 October, the following month Major John Fitzgerald became a trusted Aide-de-Camp for his hometown friend, George Washington along with another friend, Stephen Moylan. Washington now had two Irish-born Catholics as Aides. He wrote of them: "*Aides-de-Camp are persons in whom entire confidence must be placed: it requires men of abilities to execute the duties with propriety and despatch, where there is a multiplicity of business as must attend the Commander-in-Chief of such an army as this; and persuaded I am that nothing but the zeal of those gentlemen who live with me and act in this capacity, for the great American cause and personal attachment to me, have induced them to undergo the trouble and confinement they have experienced since they became members of my family.*" They were raised to the rank of Lieutenant Colonels and their pay of \$33 a month was raised to \$40.

Fitzgerald was part of Washington's military family at Valley Forge, carried classified dispatches and returned to Valley Forge. He crossed the Delaware with, and fought beside, Washington at the battles of Trenton and Princeton and was wounded at the Battle of Monmouth after which he was forced to return to civilian life. Yet his contributions were not over. After recovering in late 1778, he continued his mercantile business and support of the war effort. In April, 1781, British ships arrived at Alexandria to torch the town. Fitzgerald rounded up a few men and organized a presence that exaggerated their numbers frightening fleet away – the bluff had worked and Alexandria was saved.

After the war, Fitzgerald became Mayor of Alexandria in 1783 and in 1785, he became one of four directors in Washington's post-war business venture – The Patowmack Company – to build canals to improve Potomac River navigation and reach the Ohio River Valley. In 1795, Fitzgerald founded the first Catholic church in Alexandria – now the Basilica of St Mary. When Washington was re-elected President of the U.S in 1793, Fitzgerald succeeded him as President of Patowmack. Both he and Washington remained involved until their life-long friendship came to an end in December 1799 as John Fitzgerald passed away on December 2 just 12 days before the other great American who was lost in December – his friend George Washington on December 14. They died two years before the canal opened at Great Falls, but their vision of a strong nation linked by a long-distance trade network came true. Their frequent toast, "*Success to the navigation of the Potomac!*" became a footnote of American history, just as the remembrance of Colonel John Fitzgerald is a footnote in the history of the town he loved and served so well in life – Alexandria!

Today the Alexandria Town Council is considering changing the name of Fitzgerald Square on King Street to King Street Park because a few politically motivated revisionists claim that Fitzgerald had a few household slaves, just like his friends Washington, Jefferson and other founding fathers. There is no evidence that they were mistreated or that he was a cruel employer and the local AOH is leading a fight to keep Fitzgerald's name prominently displayed in the city he loved, served and saved. They are even erecting a statue of Fitzgerald at St. Mary's Basilica – the church he founded. It remains to be seen whether the park will be named for Fitzgerald or the King he fought. What's next – the Washington Monument or the Jefferson Memorial ?