

SELDENS LANDING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

In 2000, the Loudoun County School Board approved the name Seldens Landing for the new elementary school that opened on Coton Commons Drive east of Leesburg in 2001. The school stands in Virginia Precinct 813 known as Seldens Landing. Most likely, the name of the precinct was derived from nearby Selden Island located east along the Virginia shore of the Potomac River.

Once called Eden Island, the island was renamed when it was acquired by Dr. Wilson Cary Selden in 1821. Dr. Selden (1761- 1835) owned the over 2000-acre Exeter plantation which extended north of the island, along the Potomac River, and east of Leesburg.

The son of Joseph Selden and Mary Cary Selden, Wilson Cary Selden was born in Elizabeth City County, Virginia in 1761.¹ At the age of 18, he enlisted in the Virginia militia as a surgeon; his first post was the marine hospital in Hampton, Virginia. It is not known whether he had previous medical education or he learned while posted to the hospital. Although Selden served for only about one year, he also fought with a Virginia Artillery Company in the battle of Camden, South Carolina on August 16, 1780.²

After leaving the military, Selden married his first cousin Mary Mason (1754-1787), the niece of George Mason of Gunston Hall. The Seldens lived at their family home, Buckroe Plantation, in Elizabeth City County, Virginia. Mary inherited 4,033 acres of land east of Leesburg and along the Potomac River on which the previous owner, Francis Awbrey, Jr., had established a "Quarter."³ Generally, the Tidewater migrants settled in the southeastern portion of Loudoun and established large tobacco-producing plantations, similar to those that they had left in the Tidewater region. They brought the institution of slavery with them. Mary gave approximately half of the land to her son William Byrd Page by her first husband Mann Page. Selden inherited the remainder of the property when Mary died in 1787.

In 1793, Selden sold Buckroe Plantation and a year later married Eleanor Love (1772-1816). In late 1794 or early 1795, Wilson and Eleanor moved to the over 2,000 acres of

¹ *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (Richmond, VA: House of the Society, 1902. P. 109

² [p. 14, "Virginia in the American Revolution" exhibition]

³ Thomas Hart Taylor, Jr., "Exeter: An 18th Century Plantation in Loudoun County, Virginia." A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the School of Architecture, University of Virginia, May 1973, p. 2. Copy in the Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, VA in the Unpublished Papers Files. A "quarter" means that the land was under cultivation usually by enslaved workers and an overseer.

land in Loudoun County that Dr. Selden inherited from his first wife. In 1795, he purchased 336 acres of adjoining land from William Byrd Page (from the 2,000 acres that Page was given by his mother Mary Mason Selden), and a grist mill on Tuscarora Creek.⁴ By the fourth quarter of the 18th century, tobacco had worn out the soil and was replaced by grain crops such as corn and wheat. Selden's purchase of the grist mill indicated his intention to grow grain as well as hay on his property.

Now one of the wealthiest landowners in Loudoun County, Dr. Wilson Cary Selden and his wife Eleanor greatly enlarged an existing house between 1795 and 1803 and named it "Exeter." In 1796, Eleanor Selden gave birth to their first child, Wilson Cary Selden, Jr. With their growing family and prominence in the county, the Seldens created a house to fit their status. The seven-part house featured a two-story center section with wings on either side and covered walkways leading to flanking dependencies. Its rich ornamentation made it one of the most elaborate houses in northern Virginia. Located near what is now the northwest corner of the intersection of the Leesburg Bypass and Edwards Ferry Road, Exeter included the main house, a smoke house, a dairy, slave quarters, privies, a chicken house, an ice house, a stable, a barn, and a corn crib.

The closest markets for Loudoun County produce were the towns of Alexandria and Georgetown, ports with access to trade with other states and internationally. The Little River Turnpike opened in 1806 and provided an improved road from Alexandria to Aldie that greatly facilitated wagon traffic from southern Loudoun County to market. In late 1808 to 1809, Selden was one of the commissioners of the Leesburg Turnpike Road, a group chartered to create a turnpike from Leesburg to the Little River Turnpike, but which eventually chose the path that has become Route 7 today.⁵

Exeter operated on the labor of enslaved African Americans both in the house and in the fields. In 1800, of the 20,5223 total population of Loudoun County, just over 25% (4,990) were African or of African descent and enslaved; they lived and worked on farms mostly in eastern and southern portions of the county. According to the 1810 federal census records, Selden was one of only two Loudoun County residents to own more than 50 slaves.⁶ Selden owned a decreasing number of enslaved persons over the next two decades: 38 in 1820; and 29 in 1830. By 1840, when Selden, Jr. owned Exeter, there were 21 enslaved men and women working on the farm.⁷

⁴ Taylor, p. 4.

⁵ Fairfax Harrison, *Landmarks of Old Prince William* (Berryville, VA: Chesapeake Book Company, 1964), p. 567.

⁶ Charles P. Poland, Jr., *From Frontier to Suburbia* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2005), pp. 131-132. The 1810 census records Selden owning 52 slaves; Ludwell Lee of Belmont owned 69 slaves.

⁷ 1820-1840 Federal Censuses, District 1, Loudoun County, Virginia [Wilson C. Selden, Jr.], www.ancestry.com.

In Loudoun County as a whole, the total number of enslaved people in the county decreased over the decades leading up to the Civil War (1861-1865). More than 1,000 Loudoun slaves were sold between 1800 and 1810. Between 1850 and 1860 approximately 1,300 enslaved persons were sold out of the county. Several factors influenced this including: the division of large properties into smaller size farms; the change from labor-intensive tobacco planting to grain crops that could be managed with fewer workers; and debts that could be settled by selling what owners considered their valuable property. Residents in the “Deep South” states were clearing large swaths of land and planting cotton and sugar cane, crops that were labor-intensive. Planters there were willing to pay hundreds of dollars more for slaves. The market for enslaved laborers there made for a period of “forced migration of people” from Loudoun County.⁸

In 1816, Eleanor Selden died. The next year, Dr. Selden married Mary Bowles Armistead Alexander, a widow who lived in Alexandria. Together they had three children and continued to build their estate. In 1821, the Seldens purchased Eden Island from Ludwell Lee and Richard H. Lee for \$36,000, a large sum at the time for the 365 acres that most likely included some buildings.⁹ The island was probably purchased as a farm for son Wilson Cary Selden, Jr. who married Louisa Alexander in 1822. Louisa Alexander Selden died in 1826. Circa 1830, a two-story brick house was constructed on the island, and son Wilson Cary Selden, Jr. and his second wife, Elizabeth Armistead Lee (daughter of Ludwell Lee), lived there on a farm that included enslaved persons and livestock.¹⁰

In December 1831, Wilson Selden, Jr. was one of a committee of nine prominent Loudoun County men who drafted a petition to the county delegates in the Virginia legislature. The petition urged the legislature to gradually abolish slavery in Virginia. While some of the committee members were Quaker and opposed to slavery, five men including Selden were slave owners. In August of that year, the slave Nat Turner led a revolt of about 80 enslaved persons in Southampton County, Virginia that resulted in their deaths and the deaths of approximately 55 white people. The petition sought to prevent slave revolts by gradually emancipating enslaved persons and sending them to

⁸ History Matters, LLC, “Loudoun County African-American Historic Architectural Resources Survey,” Loudoun County Department of Planning, September 2004, p. 12. Also Steven Deyle, “An ‘Abominable’ New Trade: The Closing of the African Slave Trade and the Changing Patterns of U.S. Political Power, 1808-60,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Oct. 2009, Third Series, Vol. 66, No. 4, Abolish the Slave Trades: Ironies and Reverberations (Oct., 2009), p. 839.

⁹ Montgomery County Deed Book V, p. 416

¹⁰ Will of Wilson Cary Selden written 26 March 1831; recorded 12 May 1835 [LCDB 4W, p. 144; Taylor, pp. viii & 71.

a new colony in Africa. It was written from an attitude of fear rather than any moral sentiment about the injustice of slavery.¹¹ The petition was not successful.

Dr. Wilson Cary Selden died on March 14, 1835 and was buried at Belmont, the home of Ludwell Lee that is located approximately four miles south of Exeter.¹² Wilson Cary Selden, Jr. inherited Exeter and 1,000 acres including the enslaved persons and horses he owned on Selden Island. Son John Selden inherited the 365-acre island plus an additional 260 acres. The remainder of the real estate along with personal property was left to his wife, Mary Bowles Selden, “for her support and for the education and maintenance of my children by her.”¹³

Wilson Cary Selden, Jr. and his wife Elizabeth moved to Exeter and sold approximately 200 acres to pay Dr. Selden’s debts, leaving them with a still sizable 824-acre farm.

Wilson Cary Selden, Jr. died in 1845. His wife Elizabeth moved to Sugarland Farm that was located south of Exeter along Leesburg Turnpike; Sugarland Farm was part of her dowry. Exeter was conveyed to their daughter Eleanor Love Selden who had married John Augustine Washington two years earlier. In 1846, Washington sold Exeter out of the Seedless family; nearby neighbor General George Rust of Rocklands purchased Exeter at public auction.¹⁴

Sometime between 1835, when John Selden inherited Selden Island, and 1850, when the federal census records him living in Jefferson County, Virginia (now West Virginia), John Selden sold the island and moved west. He died in 1896 in Charles Town, Jefferson County, West Virginia.¹⁵

¹¹ Poland, pp. 145-146.

¹² Taylor, p. 71.

¹³ The Will of Dr. Wilson Cary Selden, Taylor, p. 118 [LCDB 4W, p. 144]

¹⁴ The Will of Wilson Cary Selden, Jr., Taylor, pp. 120-121; “Exeter” National Register of Historic Places Nomination, January 1973, Section 8.

¹⁵ U.S. Find a Grave Index and 1850 Federal Census, Charles Town, Jefferson County, Virginia. Accessed through Ancestry.com.