

William Bicknell

*People of London Town, Maryland**

William Bicknell was a trained sailmaker. His experience came from training in the service of the Royal Navy. It was a fact that he proudly announced when he first appears in the historical record. In the late summer of 1749, the newly arrived Bicknell took out an advertisement in the *Maryland Gazette* offering his skills “for Ships or Other Vessels...at reasonable rates.” Initially he was living in Annapolis with a Mr. Williamson.

WILLIAM BICKNELL, SAIL-MAKER,
Who served his Time in his Majesty's Yard at Chatham,
 LIVES now in Annapolis, and will make Sails for Ships,
 or other Vessels, in the best Manner, and at reasonable
 Rates. He may be found at Mr. Williamson's.

Maryland Gazette, 23 August 1749

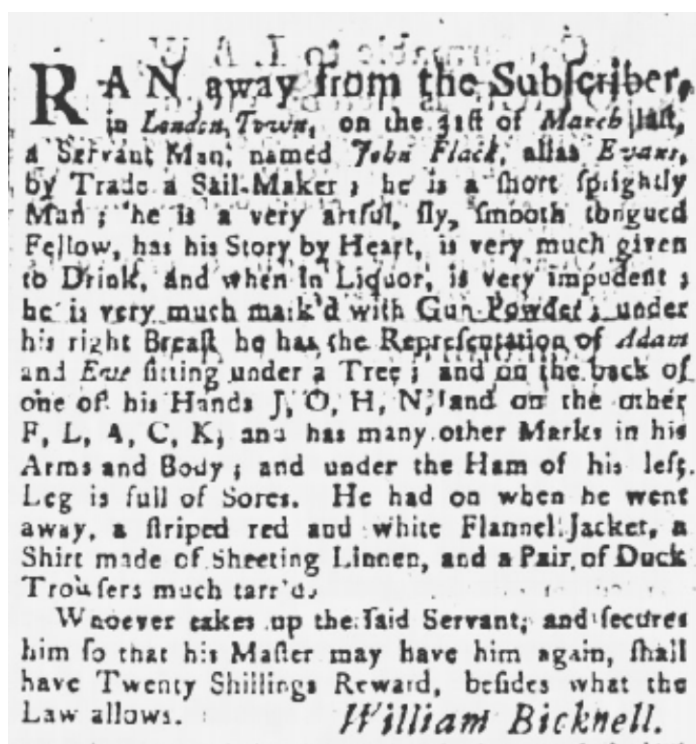
Bicknell's trade was a popular one. In June 1753, the ship *Thames* arrived in Annapolis carrying convict servants, including the thief John Evans. Bicknell bought Evans for his skill at making and mending seines and nets, as he advertised the following month. Bicknell would later declare Evans a sailmaker.

WILLIAM BICKNELL,
 SAIL-MAKER, in ANNAPOLIS,
 HEREBY gives Notice to a-
 ny Gentlemen who want to have any SAILS
 made, either for Ships, Snows, Brigs, Schooners,
 or Sloops, that they may depend on having as good
 Work done by him, as cheap, and as well fitted,
 as any brought from Europe; having already done
 the following, to the Satisfaction of his Employers,
 viz. Sails for one Ship, two Brigantines, one
 Sloop, and a Schooner, for Mr. Galloway; two
 Snows and a Brigantine, for Dr. Stuart; one Ship,
 one Snow, and a Sloop, for Mr. Roberts; one
 Brig each, for Mr. Ridgely and Mr. Sligh; and a
 great deal of Work for Mr. Creagh, and many o-
 thers, too tedious to mention. His Price for Work
 by the Bolt, is 7 s. 6 d. Sterling, or equal to that
 in Currency: If by the Job, as he can agree. He
 likewise makes Red Bottoms, if the Employer finds
 Canvas, at 8 s. or, if he finds it, at 20 s. And
 his Employers may depend on being served with
 Fidelity, by
 Their humble Servant,
 William Bicknell,
 N. B. He has a Servant Man from London,
 who can make or mend Seines or Nets.

Maryland Gazette, 30 August 1753

By this point, Bicknell had earned enough money to diversify his interests. In November 1753 he applied for and received a license to open a tavern out of his “dwelling house,” producing the not inconsiderable sum of £20 current money to cover it. By obtaining his license, he swore to prevent “idle loose or disorderly persons to tippel game or commit other disorders or irregularities.”[†] Not only does this show that he had access to the money to license his tavern, but also that he was no longer living with Mr. Williamson and had acquired his own home.

In April of 1754, Bicknell advertises from London Town for the recapture of his convict servant John Evans, who had changed his name to John Flack. Promising twenty shillings for his return, Bicknell gives a colorful description of his wayward servant.



RAN away from the Subscriber, in London Town, on the 31st of March last, a Servant Man, named *John Flack*, alias *Evans*, by Trade a Sail-Maker; he is a short spightly Man; he is a very artful, fly, smooth-tongued Fellow, has his Story by Heart, is very much given to Drink, and when in Liquor, is very impudent; he is very much mark'd with Gun Powder; under his right Breast he has the Representation of *Adam and Eve* sitting under a Tree; and on the back of one of his Hands *J, O, H, N*; and on the other *F, L, A, C, K*; and has many other Marks in his Arms and Body; and under the Ham of his left Leg is full of Sores. He had on when he went away, a striped red and white Flannel Jacket, a Shirt made of Sheeting Linnen, and a Pair of Duck Trowsers much tarr'd.

Whoever takes up the said Servant; and secures him so that his Master may have him again, shall have Twenty Shillings Reward, besides what the Law allows.

William Bicknell.

Maryland Gazette, 11 April 1754, page 3.

It is unknown if Evans was ever recaptured, but Bicknell does not appear to have been hurt too much by the loss of labor. In November he again paid the £20 required to renew his tavern license.

1755 was not a kind year to William Bicknell. Numerous court cases appear with Bicknell as both plaintiff and defendant. The most prominent of these cases was brought against him by the London Town merchant Stephen West in June, who claimed an unpaid debt of £20 and eighteen shillings. Not only did West win the case, but Bicknell was ordered to pay damages as well as his debt. A second case from West is brought against Bicknell in November, perhaps indicating that Bicknell had not paid the damages and debt, but the record is unclear on that point.[‡] The last record of Bicknell in the area is a 1757 court case brought against him by Thomas Gibbs, but his story does not end with litigation.

William Bicknell reappears in 1764 aboard the Royal Navy warship *HMS Richmond*. The *Richmond* was a 32 gun frigate that spent much of its time in American waters. While the *Richmond* anchored in London, Bicknell wrote his will. In it, he leaves two thirds of his property to his wife Ann in Annapolis. This is the first time his wife is mentioned in the historical record. Given that there are no children mentioned in the will, it may be safely assumed that the couple was childless. The remaining third of his estate is left to the executor of his will, a brother by the name of Andrew who was a weaver by trade residing in Yeovil in County Somerset, England. Any of Bicknell's remaining possessions aboard the *Richmond* were bequeathed to the ship's cook.[§]

* As the research into colonial London Town's inhabitants is an ongoing process, the caveat is offered that additional information may be found at any time and that a correction of information might also occur at any time.

† MSA C91-21, November Court 1753, Folio 718.

‡ MSA C91-22, June Court 1755, Folio 174 & Folio 317.

§ "Will of William Bicknell, Master Sailmaker of His Majesty's Ship Richmond," *UK National Archives*, 22 June 1764, PRO 11/899/393.