

William Strachan *People of London Town, Maryland*ⁱ

William Strachan led a life of adventure that was beyond the reach of most London Town residents. The sea faring Scotsman first appears as a sailor on the ship *Convener* of Leith. The ship sailed across the North Sea from Scotland to Sweden, docking in Gothenburg. Strachan, along with a sailor named Bailie, stole a skiff to desert from his vessel, intending to sail for nearby Norway and from there to secure passage back to Britain. The plan was ill conceived as the two packed only “a few Pieces of Beef, some Water, and Bisket” for the trip. They did, however, also think to pack “a Compass, Line, &c.” which proves that they possessed the ability to navigate by dead reckoning. Navigation was a valuable skill that would serve Strachan well later in life.

As it was, they “were soon drove from their Latitude by a strong Easterly Wind” that swung them around Denmark and into the open sea. After eight days “they were quite senseless, and so feeble, as to be unable to work at their oars.” Miraculously, the skiff drifted into Scarborough, England, where they were saved. Everything appears to have been forgiven, as “publick Thanksgiving” was given “in the church of Leith for their Deliverance.”¹

Three years later, Strachan had arrived in Maryland. He married Mary Sympson of London Town, daughter of a prominent Scottish merchant and mariner.² Within two years he was commanding his first vessel, sailing the ship *William and Anne* in a wartime convoy to London in 1745.³ The return voyage was an unlucky one, and Strachan’s ship was captured by the French “near the banks of *Newfoundland*, and Ransom’d for 1500 Guineas.”⁴

In 1747 Margaret and William welcomed their second child into the world: Margaret.⁵ It is unclear when precisely her old sister Eleanor was born.

Captain Strachan took command of the sloop *Hopewell* on her maiden voyage out of Annapolis in 1749, but she sprung a leak in the Atlantic and he was forced to turn back. On October 7, while at anchor in Norfolk, a hurricane struck. The tide rose by fifteen feet, lifting a nearby warehouse with all of its goods and washing it toward the *Hopewell* where it “touch’d” her quarter “without doing any Hurt.”⁶

Over the next several years Strachan crisscrossed the Atlantic, sailing to Barbados, Virginia, Antigua, London, and Madeira.⁷ During a trip to Madeira, commanding the brig *Nancy*, Strachan sighted the *Hopewell* off the Patuxent River. As a gesture of good will, Strachan dispatched two sailors to carry them a boat load of bread. One of these sailors was the enslaved man George Cook, who was owned by Strachan himself. No sooner had the sailors unloaded the bread than the *Hopewell* cut away their boat

¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Sunday August 21, 1740, Page 2.

² F. Edgar Wright, *Anne Arundel County Church Records, 17th & 18th Centuries*, Family Line Publications, Westminster, Maryland, page 57.

³ *Maryland Gazette*, May 10, page 4.

⁴ *Maryland Gazette*, November 15, 1745.

⁵ Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catalog Entry, Margaret Strachan (Mrs. Thomas Harwood), Accession Number 33.24, < <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11710>>.

⁶ *Maryland Gazette*, October 18, 1749.

⁷ *Maryland Gazette*, November 1, 1749, page 4; July 4, 1750, page 3; November 21, 1750, page 3; January 3, 1754, page 3.

and kidnapped the pair. The sailors aboard had turned pirate, murdered their captain, and kidnapped Strachan's men to help them sail away.⁸ Captain Strachan almost certainly pursued them, but with a faster vessel and a head start, the *Hopewell* disappeared into the Atlantic. Months later, the sailors were rescued in South Carolina, and George Cook was returned to slavery under Strachan in London Town.⁹

Strachan was heavily invested in slavery. Though he never commanded a slave ship, he owned fifteen enslaved people at the end of his life. George Cook is the first enslaved person mentioned on his probate inventory, and given the value of fifty pounds sterling.¹⁰ The labor of his enslaved people contributed significantly to his wealth and position in society. Strachan joined the prestigious South River Club in 1756.¹¹

Shortly after the pirates of the *Hopewell* kidnapped his men, the world descended into a global conflict starting with the French and Indian War and exploding into the Seven Years War. Just as he had done in the 1740's, Strachan took to traveling in convoy with other merchant vessels under the protection of the Royal Navy. At the height of this conflict, and returning from London without a convoy, his brig *Betsey* was seized by a French privateer, but rescued "by a *Bristol* Letter of Marque Ship, and carried into Lisbon."¹²

His last known command was the schooner *Molly* in 1763. After this he begins to look to business ashore. This may have been motivated by the chaotic and lengthy legal battle that followed the death of neighbor and fellow sea captain Anthony Beck, who died at sea in 1749 with no legal will. In 1765 he bought a 1 1/5-acre plot of Scorton Plantation bordering London Town from merchant James Dick.¹³ That same year, he became one third owner of the Newington Ropewalk.¹⁴

Despite his brush with starvation in the North Sea, an encounter with murderous mutineers, and being twice captured by privateers, Strachan became perhaps the most prolific sea captain in London Town's history. On his death in 1768, his estate was valued at over £805.¹⁵ His daughters would each survive him to marry prominent merchants in Annapolis, and his wife held considerable land in London Town well after William's Death.

ⁱ 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.

⁸ *Maryland Gazette*, April 11, 1754, page 3.

⁹ *New York Mercury*, June 17, 1754, page 2.

¹⁰ Mechelle Kerns, *London Town: The Life of a Colonial Town*, Master's Thesis, UMBC:1999, page 346.

¹¹ Joshua Dorsey Warfield, *The Founder of Anne Arundel and Howard Countries, Maryland*, Kohn & Pollock: 1905, page 202.

¹² *Maryland Gazette*, June 11, 1760.

¹³ Mechelle L. Kerns-Nocerito, *The History of London Town, Maryland: A Case Study of an Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Tobacco Port and its Role in the Colonial Maritime Economy*, Doctorate Dissertation, unpublished, University of St Andrews, Scotland, page 102.

¹⁴ Kerns-Nocerito, *The History of London Town, Maryland*, 260.

¹⁵ MSA AA Co. Probate Liber 98, folio 203; 1768- William Strachan.