

"THE RAMBLER" by John M. McKelway
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LONGTIME COLUMNIST JOHN M. MCKELWAY DIES

By J.Y. Smith June 2, 1998

John M. McKelway, 71, who wrote "The Rambler" column for the Washington Evening Star and then for the Washington Times and was a fixture in the lives of two generations of area newspaper readers, died of cancer June 1 at his home in Kensington.

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"Bryan's Town" is a jest. There is in Maryland not far from Washington, a real Bryantown. It is in the backwoods and the backfields of the state but address a letter to Bryantown, Md. and it will find its destination. This Bryantown is in southern Maryland. It is in the county of Charles, about midway between the Potomac and Patuxent rivers and six miles from a railroad station. It is a hamlet of half a dozen families or so and the settlement is at least 200 years old.

The Rambler, while in that part of the country adjacent to Washington. was told by an old resident that Bryantown is associated with the ancestors of the present Secretary of State and that the village takes its name from them. The Maryland Bryans of other generations were important landholders in Charles county and the north-adjointing county of Prince Georges. Some of the descendants of these Bryans are still living on the ancestral lands. Bryan's Point, nearly opposite Mount Vernon and now used by the United States Government as a station of the fish commission, belonged, up to the time of its purchase by the government, a few years ago, to one branch of this old Maryland Family. It is a task which some genealogist willing to examine the parish and county court records of southern Maryland must assume, if it is desired to trace the precise relationship between **WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN** and the founder of Bryantown. It is believed there that the relationship exists. The Rambler was told that **WILLIAM BRYAN**, the great grandfather of **WILLIAM J. BRYAN** is first heard of in Culpeper county, Virginia, a county named for Lord Culpeper, who with the Earl of Arlington, was co-grantee under the crown of England to Virginia. **WILLIAM BRYAN** of Culpeper County had three children, One of these, John, was married in - 1807 to Nancy Lillard. They had ten children, and one of these, who was born at Sperryville went west in 1834, following that tide of emigration that set away from the older states to the new lands of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. In the early part of the nineteenth century, it was this exodus in search of new, rich and cheap lands that drained away so much of the rich red blood of the Potomac and Patuxent valleys. **SILAS LILLARD BRYAN** finally settled at Salem, Illinois where he married Maria Elisabeth Jennings. These were the parents of **WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN**, Now, the Rambler was told at Bryantown that it is a moral certainty that **WILLIAM BRYAN**, who is heard of in Culpeper County, Va, about 1785 - 1790 was one of the Maryland Bryans. It may have been this Bryan, or it may have

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been his father who left this Bryan home seat in southern Maryland and here is where the genealogist and his work would come in.

Some members, but not many of the Bryan family remain in the southern part of the state. What was left of the family at the outbreak of the civil war almost wrecked at its close. One of the important branches of the family owned large tracts of land in the direction of Piscataway, and Surrattsville, within a few miles of Washington. The Bryan manor house, called Bryan Hall was about two miles southwest of Surrattsville, the crossroads where the Surratts removed to after they moved away from the mill on Oxon run "in the District" just beyond the present town of Congress Heights. The Surratts ran a tavern or hotel at Surratts and **JOHN SURRATT**, husband of **MARY** was postmaster there before Mrs. Surratt moved to Washington to conduct a boarding house in which it was believed the plot to assassinate or kidnap President Lincoln and his cabinet was formed. The Surratts Tavern is still standing. Old Mrs. **SUSANNAH BRYAN**, who was a daughter of **JOHN H. LANHAM**, a Maryland landowner and one of the sheriffs of Prince Georges County was a friend of Mrs. Surratt. Both were devout Catholics and both were members of the little church of St. Mary's in Piscataway - a church which was removed from a place now called Chapel Hill near the present post office of Friendly, Prince Georges county to the village of Piscataway about 1820. The church has been rebuilt within the last few years but the lines and dimensions of the older church have been retained. The friendship between the Bryans and the Surratts did not do the Bryans any good. That country was under federal control through the civil war. The slaves of the Bryan family nearly all took their leave before emancipation, many of them settling wretched villages which sprang up around the Washington area. Nearly all of the stock of the Bryan Plantation was driven off or confiscated. Besides the intimacy between the Bryan and Surratt families, three of the Bryan boys like most of the high-bred youth in that country were in the Confederate service. One of the boys was **PLINY BRYAN** who became a spy on the staff of Gen. Beauregard. He died of yellow fever about the end of the war, and is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Savannah, Ga. (There is no record of this as **MIKE MILLER** checked it out in 1985) Another was **BOB BRYAN** who served through the war in the 1st Maryland Battery, Horse Artillery, attached to Stuart's cavalry and generally known in fame as Dement's Battery, after the commanding officer.

WILLIAM "Billy" who sleeps under the sod at his old home on the Potomac in Charles county and a number of whose descendants are living there and in Washington. "Bob walked back to Prince George's County after the surrender at Appomattox and then went west taking on the life of a prospector. He was murdered near Colfax, California, about twenty years ago.

Another of the boys was **WILLIAM PIKE BRYAN**, who was in the 3rd Maryland Infantry, Confederacy and after an prosperous old age died in a Washington Hospital three or four years ago and is buried in St. Mary's churchyard, Piscataway under one of the noblest and oldest weeping willow tree in the state. There is another son popularly known as "**SUDDY**" **BRYAN** who owned a large farm adjoining Marshall Hall and the frontage of which is on the

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Potomac, was Bryan's fishing shore - property which he inherited from his father, **RICHARD BRYAN** of **RICHARD** (I believe this should be grandfather). Mrs. **SUSANNAH BRYAN** had another son, **BAYNE BRYAN** who is now living in Buffalo, New York and has been for many years. Mrs. Bryan had two daughters that the Rambler knows of. One, **SEMPRONIA** married **CHRISTOPHER C. SEMMES** of Washington and was the mother of **CHARLIE SEMMES** who owns the motor bus line running through that part of Prince George's County. The other daughter was **ELEANOR**, who became the wife of **WALTER P. GRIFFITH**, a son of Dr. Griffin of Piscataway. Both are dead and lie in the little graveyard behind the relatively new Catholic Church, St. John's, Surrattsville. The Griffiths settled on one of the Bryan farms overlooking Birch's swamp, the upper part of Piscataway creek, on the road from Surrattsville to T. B. They called the place Highland Hall, and the last time the Rambler was down that way the old frame house was still standing. There are many interesting stories about that old house, but here is one. **SIDNEY E. MUDD**, long a representative of the fifth Maryland congressional district in the house of Representatives, and one of the most prominent party men of Maryland, was in the seventies the teacher of a small country public school in the Surratts district not far from the present post office of Tippetts. He boarded with the Griffins at Highland Hall - that is he probably stayed there for the Griffins, though they always had a house full of company, never took board pay from anybody. **SIDNEY MUDD** fell in love with the first daughter of the family, **IDA GRIFFIN**. She sleeps in the churchyard of St. Thomas at Chapel Point. **IDA** had a brother named **WALTER R. GRIFFIN** who served in the Santiago campaign in the let volunteer Calvary, the Rough Riders, enlisting in one of the southwest territories whither he had moved from Maryland. After the Spanish - American war he cam home for a visit and in the Anglo - Boer was joined an English regiment and was killed in action. Queen Victoria sent a bronze medal to his folks in Prince Georges. Another grandson of old Mrs. Bryan - son of **WILLIAM PAGE BRYAN** - was **ARTHUR BRYAN** who learned the trade of machinist served for a number of years at Bock Island arsenal and then took to running a steam shovel on the Panama canal. He died three or four years ago. A sister of his **SUSANNAH** Page Bryan, 21, was in the government service at Ancon, Canal Zone, either as a teacher or a nurse. Another of the Bryan girls, **REBECCA BRYAN LYONS**, lives in one of. the Bryan ancestral homes about a mile and a half from Bryan Hall. Bryan Hall was destroyed by fire about 1884 and was partly rebuilt - that is a smaller frame house was built on part of the old foundation. That is standing. It is an interesting trip down into that part of the country, and it is so close to Washington that at night the stars of the city lights may be seen. It is a good road now from Good Hope, by way of Silver Hill and Red's Corner. It is one of the state roads of Maryland and the grades have been greatly reduced. Before that improvement, Super's Hill and Middleton's Hill on the road, were the terror of teams and drivers in that country.