

Fulton Images Link to Mayo Family, Richmond's Early History

The Fulton area of Richmond lies just downstream of Church Hill. It was first settled as Powhatan Seat, a James River plantation of 2,000 acres established in the early 1700s by Maj. William Mayo, who surveyed and laid out Richmond in 1737. This same family developed Port Mayo and for many years operated the private Mayo bridge over the James River at 14th St. The area is named for Alexander Fulton and Elizabeth Bland Mayo Fulton, whose hilltop "Mt. Erin" estate (part of Powhatan Seat, now a city park) commands one of the finest views of the city.

A candidate site for Capt. John Smith's early contact with the Powhatan Indians, the Fulton area attracted renewed interest beginning in the 1980s, as Richmond's attention returned to the waterfront. St. Mémin's images of the Fultons capture a crucial part of Richmond's early history.



St. Mémin belonged to an aristocratic French family exiled as a result of the French Revolution and relocated to New York City. Taking up the profession of "likenesses," he worked his way down the east coast to Baltimore and Washington, D.C. There he became fascinated by events – and prominent spectators who might be customers – surrounding Aaron Burr's trial in Richmond. On July 15, 1807, he ran this ad in the Virginia Argus:

Likenesses Taken and Engraved

THE subscriber begs leave to inform the ladies and gentlemen of the city of Richmond, that he takes and engraves LIKENESSES in a style never introduced before, in this country; he respectfully solicits from the inhabitants of this place, the same favor and patronage he has met with in the largest cities of the United States, where he has taken a great number of Likenesses, copies of which may be seen at his lodgings in Mrs. Harris's House nearly opposite the Custom-House.

The subscriber in order not to disappoint those who might have a desire to set for their likenesses, begs leave to suggest that his stay in this place will be short.

St. MÉMIN.



Powhatan Seat was bounded by the James River, Orleans St., and somewhere beyond Almond Creek. In 1726-32 the Mayo family built a house "500 feet from the river, just by 3 small islands." The site lies at the terminus of two Indian trails (now Rt. 5 and Rt. 60) leading east from Richmond and at the origin of Three Notched trail (now partly known as Three Chopt Rd.) running west toward the mountains.

The grounds are described as heavily landscaped with elm trees. At the end of a path leading from the front porch were two especially large elms 4 feet in diameter. Oral history in the Mayo family claims these two trees once shaded Powhatan's wigwam, and the family built a play area for children between the trees.

Alexander Fulton & Elizabeth Bland Mayo Fulton

Charcoal, white chalk, bistre pastel crayon c. 1808 by St. Mémin, currently held by the Brooklyn Museum. Obj. Nos. 30.1104, 30.1105. Images courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society

Other sources record that in 1609 Captain John Smith, president of the Jamestown colony, persuaded Powhatan's son Little Powhatan to sell him the fortified village at the top of "Powhatan's Hill":

The hill on which lived the Powhatans was a palisaded fort which John Smith called "Nonesuch." John Smith was an observing fellow and the Powhatans were wise in choosing this as their pow-wow hill for from the brow the look-out or guard could see the enemy approach from up the river beyond "The Falls" and look over the lowgrounds on which grew their tobacco and maize for miles down the "Powhatan flu."

—*The Trail of the Three-Notched Road*

Another link to the early Indian village is the Powhatan Stone, presented by the Mayo family to the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities and now resting with an inscribed plaque at Chimborazo Park in Church Hill.



Elm trees at Powhatan Seat (Va. Hist. Soc.)

In the late 1700s Alexander Fulton, described as an English tobacconist visiting from Ireland, was a guest of the Mayo family at Powhatan Seat, where he teased five-year-old Elizabeth Bland Mayo that one day he would return and claim her as his bride. Later he emigrated to America and began living in Baltimore. By 1807 he had moved to Richmond and, in fact, married Elizabeth Mayo. Visiting artist St. Mémin drew their portraits in about 1808.



Powhatan Seat (Va. Hist. Soc.)

On Nov. 7, 1819, the bride's parents gifted them a parcel of land from Powhatan Seat "known and called by the name of Mount Erin, containing sixty-eight acres," to be held in trust benefitting their eventual children. Together they had the rolling hill terraced and built a house overlooking the city. In his Richmond history Samuel Mordecai describes: "[O]n a beautiful elevation, in the midst of a fine grove of native oaks, &c., he fixed his seat and called it Mount Erin." Elsewhere the house is described as three stories of brick painted dove gray. There are no known images of Mt. Erin.

The site was famous for the clear waters of its spring (remnant features, roughly at Northampton and Goddin Sts., were destroyed by Fulton Hill Properties in 2017) and for its gardens, which included a brick walk lined with boxwood. A charming detail is the Fultons' whimsy in shaping the initials M[ayo] and F[ulton] into the ends of the boxwood hedges. The original brick walk and overlook remain to this day.

Alexander Fulton died at Mt. Erin in 1823. In an 1848 document referencing the deaths of both their parents, the Fulton children (William M., Samuel A., Elizabeth J., Mary Jane, and John Bell) petitioned to recover Mt. Erin and its now 132 acres from the trust. The heirs drafted a deed to sell the estate back to their uncle Robert A. Mayo at Powhatan Seat. One of the Fulton sons, William, remained in the area with his wife Cornelia, buying and selling various properties. A last trace of the Fultons is found in a letter dated June 6, 1865, from Cornelia to executor Coulter Cabell, requesting "full disclosure of debts and administration" of her husband William's estate before her "departure." In 1868 the house burned to the ground.

In an odd historical footnote, Joseph Mayo, great-grandson of Maj. William Mayo, served as Richmond's mayor during the Civil War. In April 1865, with the city aflame, he rode to the edge of Powhatan Seat and there surrendered the city to U.S. Maj. Atherton Stevens. A marker at Rt. 5 and Orleans St. notes the surrender site.