

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR ANCESTORS ...

# INDENTURED SERVANT TO COLONIAL OFFICIAL

**John Cage**  
**(c. 1620 – 1677)**  
**(*possible* Cage**  
**ancestor)**

— *Bradley Rymph*

VISIT TO HISTORIC ST. MARY'S CITY,  
MARYLAND:

October 25, 2009 (with José Baquiran)

Not all white immigrants sailed to the early American colonies as free men and women, in search of immediate opportunities for religious freedom and/or economic opportunity. Many came as “indentured servants” — contractually bound to their masters for a specified number of years (typically, three to seven).

In exchange for their sponsor’s paying for their ocean transport to America — and then for their food, clothing, lodging, and other necessities during their indenture — these servants typically forfeited all personal freedoms. Many (if not most) indentured servants sailed to America under the age of 21, with their parents having negotiated their service.

Indentured servants could be bought and sold. They could not marry without their owner’s permission, they were subject to whatever physical punishments their owners chose to dole out, and, for women, their period of indenture could be lengthened if they became pregnant while still a servant. The colonial courts vigilantly enforced the contractual rights of “owners” of indentured servants. Indeed, servants could be subject to brutal violence at the hands of their owners, and many servants ran away or committed suicide during their period of bondage.

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For all these reasons, indentured servanthood has sometimes been compared to slavery. But there was always one major difference between an indentured servant (usually of European heritage) and a slave (usually of African heritage): an indentured servant could always look forward to the day when his/her contracted bondage would end and he/she would be free. At the end of his/her period of indenture, a freed servant was typically to be given a payment known as “freedom dues” — a new set of clothes, tools, money, and/or a grant of land. In Maryland, the Provincial Court found in 1648 that the area’s customs required the following for a released servant’s wages:

one cap or hatt, one new cloath or frize suite, one shirt one pr shoes and stockins one axe one broad and narrow hoe, 50 Acres land, and 3 barrels Corne.

**John Cage** was one of the many indentured servants who sailed to the American colonies in early 1600s. His exact year of birth is not known, but he is believed to have been born sometime around 1620. He arrived in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, from Portsmouth, England, in November 1636, just two years after the 1634 landing of the *Ark* and the *Dove* in St. Mary’s City, launching the British settlement of the Maryland colony. Thus, Cage was probably a teenager at the time.

Slavery was legal in the Chesapeake region of the American colonies, such as in St. Mary’s County. However, many planters in the region preferred to purchase and use indentured servants rather than enslaved persons because the planters would be granted 50 acres each for each indentured servant whose trans-Atlantic voyage they paid.

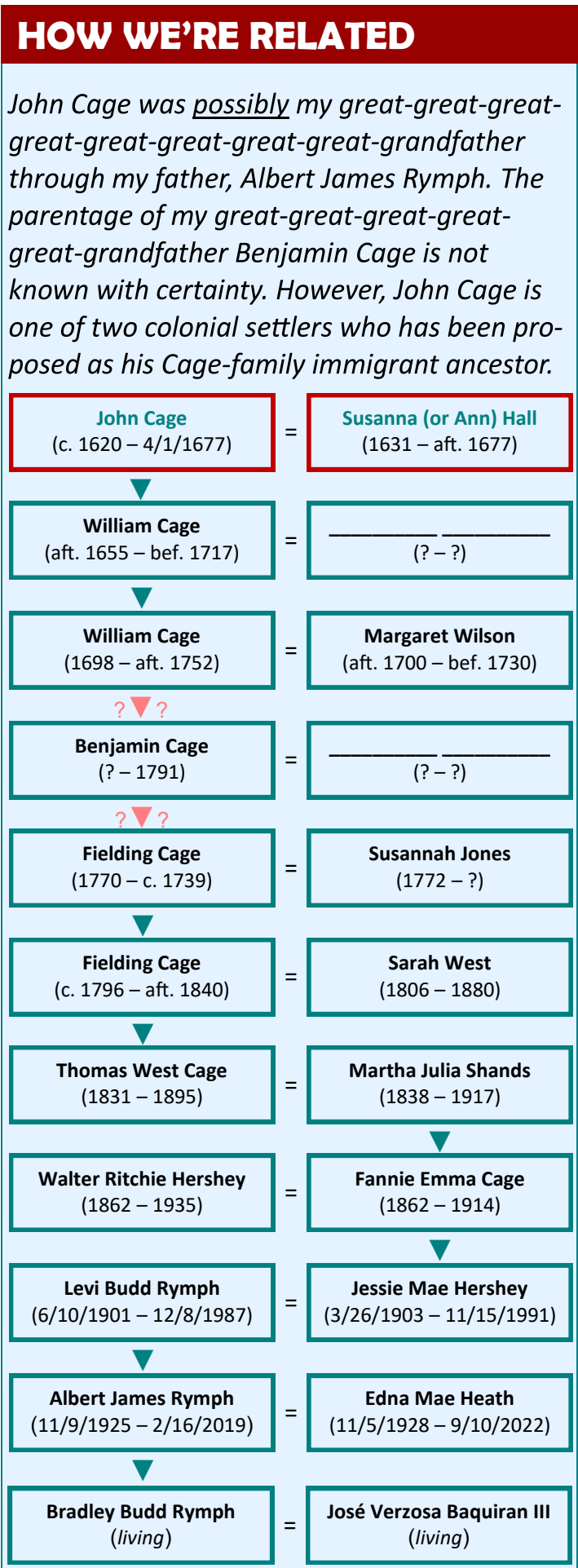


*Cross Manor, home of Thomas Cornwallis and oldest surviving house in Maryland.*

Cage became an indentured servant, probably working in tobacco fields, to one of the most notable figures in Maryland’s earliest colonial history — Thomas Cornwallis (c. 1605–1675/76). Cornwallis was born into a noble Catholic family in England. However, as a second son, he was unable to inherit land in England. Instead, he migrated to America. In 1634, he was one of the passengers with Leonard Calvert (the first Proprietary Governor of Maryland) on the *Ark* and *Dove*, which first settled St. Mary’s City. *(Maryland was originally established as the Roman Catholic colony among Britain’s lands in America.)*

Cornwallis became one of the original Commissioners of the Maryland colony. According to “Exploring Maryland’s Roots”:

As Commissioner, Cornwallis advised the Governor about important matters. During the colony’s early years, Cornwallis served as captain and chief military officer. He led the soldiers in a number of battles, especially in the Kent Island region.... Cornwallis was involved in several naval battles over Kent Island in 1635, and in 1638 he led an expedition that took control of the island for the Calvert family. He also fought against the Indians in 1643.



## THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF JOHN CAGE

To wife Susanna, extx., plantation, 300 acres, on Wiccomica R.

" son John and hrs., sd. Plantation at death of wife afsd.

" younger son William and hrs., plantation afsd. should son John die without issue.

" daughter Margery Rowland, dau. Anna at 16 yrs of age and unborn child, to 2 child.

(unnamed) of dau. ———

- Voyders, personalty.

Test: Jno. Fanning, Hennery Rennalds

Cornwallis combined his military power with economic success. He established the first mill in the colony and built a large framed house as an example to others. Although Cornwallis grew some tobacco, he earned most of his money by investing in the fur trade.... All of these activities helped make Cornwallis wealthy. At one point, he seems to have been the richest man in Maryland."

In 1638, Cornwallis built the first framed house in Maryland. Later, beginning in 1642, he built a house known as Cross Manor on land in the St. Indigoes Creek area of St. Mary's County. The original Cross Manor house is believed to have burned down. However, the currently-standing house is believed to have been built by 1765 and is considered the oldest surviving

house in Maryland. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.

As a servant, John Cage is believed to have worked Cornwallis' tobacco lands in the northern portion of St. Mary's County that later became Charles County, Maryland.

Cage's term of indenture ended in 1644. He received 50 acres of land for his service to Cornwallis, and by 1650 had also acquired an adjacent 100 acres. Together, Cage owned this land (known as "Caggeworth/Marshall") until 1654. He later acquired 300 acres in Charles County known as "Mitchell's Platte," which he left to his widow Susanna at his death.

After his indenture, Cage became a member of the Maryland court. He served as a justice of the peace in Charles County in 1660–1661. He is also recorded as having been a coroner's juror in 1648 and 1663, as well as a foreman in 1664, and as a juror in the Provincial Court in 1652 and 1664/5.

Cage died on April 1, 1677, leaving all his lands to his widow Susanna.

## TO LEARN MORE

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