

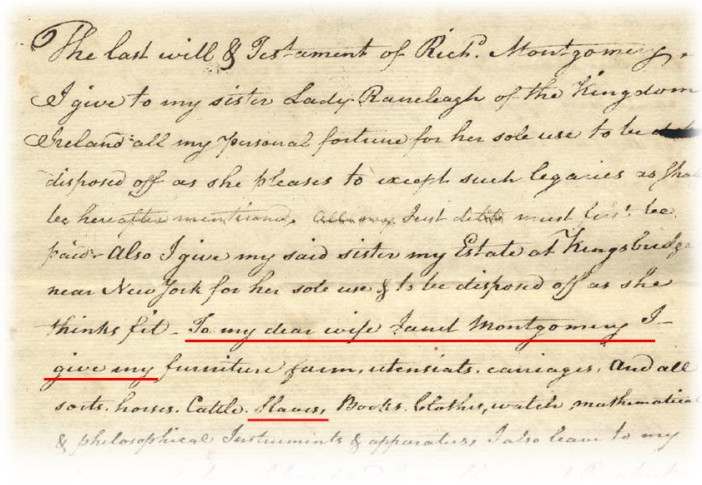
Richard Montgomery

Namesake of our county and 15 others across the nation, the first general killed in the Revolutionary War, and enslaver of an unknown number

Richard Montgomery (1738–75), namesake of both our county and Richard Montgomery High School in the county seat of Rockville, was born in Ireland and served 15 years in the British Army—fighting in the American colonies during the French and Indian/Seven Years War—before immigrating to New York in 1772 with a modest family inheritance. Within three years he was fighting *against* the British, having joined the Continental Army led by George Washington and soon commanding a contingent of soldiers from his adopted state. “Honour calls on me,” he wrote to his wife, a member of the prominent, wealthy Livingston family residing in New York’s Hudson Valley, whom he married a year after immigrating. “Like the Livingstons, Montgomery owned slaves,” acknowledged the most recent scholarly biography of him (first source listed below).

Killed leading an attack on the British in Quebec on New Year’s Eve 1775, Richard Montgomery was the first general to die in the war for independence and came to be extolled as a patriotic hero and martyr through newspaper accounts, ballads, and public orations. Forts along the Hudson River were named for him and he was even eulogized in the British House of Commons. His body is entombed in a New York City monument with an inscription penned by Benjamin Franklin, “to transmit to Posterity a grateful remembrance of the patriotism, conduct, enterprise & perseverance” of Richard Montgomery.

His status as an enslaver comes from his will (a portion of which is shown here), which included enslaved people among his estate—mentioned well into a listing of his property: “To my dear wife... I give my furniture, farm utensils, carriages of all sorts, horses, cattle, slaves, books, clothes...”¹ Upon marrying, he and his wife, Janet, were given a cottage in Rhinebeck, New York, by her grandfather. Montgomery then purchased abutting land which he farmed for two years before joining the fight for American independence. At the time that county’s population was 6 percent Black—many enslaved. Years after his death, his widow built a large estate overlooking the Hudson. It is now a campus of Bard College, which has documented that she had enslaved laborers on the property.



The last will & Testament of Rich^d. Montgomery
I give to my sister Lady Ranelagh of the Kingdom
Ireland all my personal fortune for her sole use to be
disposed of as she pleases to except such legacies as shall
be hereafter mentioned, and any debt due must be
paid. Also I give my said sister my Estate at Kingsbridge
near New York for her sole use to be disposed of as she
thinks fit. To my dear wife Janet Montgomery I
give my furniture, farm, utensils, carriages, and all
sorts, horses, Cattle, Slaves, Books, Cloths, watches mathematical
& philosophical Instruments & apparatuses I also leave to my

Some historians surmise, without firm documentation, that the enslaved held by Richard Montgomery came through an inheritance Janet received. The Livingstons were indeed one of the largest landowning families in New York, giving them much prominence and influence. But the family’s elite status had roots in slavery. Various family members held people in bondage and some had invested in shipping engaged

¹ Decades after Montgomery’s death, the handwritten word “slaves” in his will was transcribed by a descendent as “shares.” Until recently the many biographies of him apparently relied upon this and made no mention of his having held people in bondage. Discovery of the will was made by enterprising student journalists at Watkins Mill High School in first raising the issue of school names in 2018, <https://wmcurent.com/14195/showcase/records-reveal-3-mcps-high-schools-named-after-slave-owners>.

in the slave trade. Like all the colonies—north and south—New York permitted slavery and the practice continued into its statehood, ending in 1827, just over a half-century after Richard Montgomery died in battle and six years after Janet’s death.

The *Journal of the American Revolution* notes that of the 30 major generals in the war, “over half,” including George Washington, were enslavers, “which is a bit lower in proportion to the...signers of the Declaration of Independence” who held others in bondage. “While certainly a small percentage, the proportion of the major generals who advocated ending slavery is not certain. The contradiction between [slavery and] fighting for political liberty and...personal liberty did not seem to manifest itself (or be important enough) in the minds of this group of Revolutionary leaders.” Richard Montgomery is mentioned in this account only among those generals who bequeathed enslaved people.

His namesake high school “descends” from Montgomery County High School, built in 1905 in the center of Rockville as the county’s first. It was informally called Rockville High School after the county’s second, Gaithersburg, opened a number of years later. When the so-called Rockville Colored High School opened in 1927 (as the first such facility for Black students), the similarity of the names proved confusing—as well as a source of anguish to some whites—and the full name of the county’s namesake was applied to the original all-white high school, although it wasn’t officially adopted until June 1935.²

There are at least 13 other “Montgomery counties” around the nation named for Richard Montgomery. The name of ours was selected along with George Washington’s in 1776 to commemorate two notable Revolutionary War generals. Montgomery County was formed from a southern portion of a then-much-larger Frederick County and Washington County was created from a western portion. At the time, they were the first two Maryland counties *not* named for European royalty or nobility. It is doubtful that Richard Montgomery ever visited any of the area that is now Montgomery County, Maryland.

Main sources:

Michael Gabriel, *Major General Richard Montgomery: The Making of an American Hero*, 2002

Richard Montgomery will, Edward Livingston Papers, Manuscript Division, Princeton University Library Special Collections, <https://findingaids.princeton.edu/catalog/C0280>

Robert C. Plumb, “General Richard Montgomery: ‘A Grateful Remembrance,’” *The Montgomery County Story*, Vol. 64, No. 1, Spring 2021, https://mchdr.montgomeryhistory.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12366/454/mcs_v064_n1_2021_lachin_plumb.pdf

Gene Procknow, “Slavery through the Eyes of Revolutionary Generals,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, <https://allthingsliberty.com/2017/11/slavery-eyes-revolutionary-generals>

² Adding to the mix of earlier Rockville school names, the unrelated present Rockville High School opened in 1968.