

## Thomas Sprigg Wootton

***“Father of Montgomery County,” Revolutionary War patriot, physician, and enslaver of a relatively large number of people for his time period***

Thomas Sprigg Wootton (circa 1740–89), namesake of Thomas S. Wootton High School in Rockville, played a formative role in the birth of both our nation and county and in Maryland’s transformation from a proprietary colony to a state in the new nation. A medical doctor and large landowner west of Rockville, he also held a comparatively large number of enslaved people to farm his tobacco plantation.

Born into a wealthy family, he was elected to the lower house of the colonial legislature in 1769, but in 1774 he aligned with other influential men who issued the Hungerford Resolves, calling for an end to trade with Britain in the wake of the Boston Tea Party as “the most effectual means for the securing of American Freedom.” (Others involved, including Zadok Magruder, were primarily well-to-do businessmen and large landowners—most of them enslavers as well.) The declaration, named for the Rockville tavern where it was drafted, was a risky, early expression of resistance to the motherland. This was followed by Wootton’s involvement in various associations actively working for independence, and his assisting in the creation of a militia from Maryland that fought as part of the Continental Army commanded by George Washington in the Revolutionary War.

As a delegate to the 1776 Maryland Constitutional Convention coinciding with independence, Wootton authored the motion that carved Montgomery County out of southern Frederick County—earning him the title of “Father of Montgomery County.” He also urged the convention to expand suffrage (among white men only) by eliminating a requirement that only property owners could vote, but the proposal was defeated. With the creation of the Maryland General Assembly, he was elected the first Speaker of its House of Delegates.

Wootton inherited an unknown number of enslaved people from his father. A 1783 tax assessment shows him holding 25 enslaved people. Property records three years later show the purchase of 10 more. The most comprehensive look at his life (cited below) thus estimates that he enslaved “around three dozen” altogether during his life, placing him among the largest slaveholders in the county at the time. (Only a few Maryland planters in the mid-1700s owned 20 or more enslaved people, and the first national census taken a year after Wootton’s 1789 death shows that only 1 percent of enslavers in Montgomery County individually held more than 30 people in bondage.)<sup>1</sup> In his will, Wootton manumitted three enslaved individuals, the remainder bequeathed to a nephew with instructions to “be kind” along with a request that families not be separated.

The school bearing his name—built near his plantation and home—opened in 1970. Until then there were no known commemoratives to him in the county he is credited with creating. A roadside marker summarizing his life, initiated by members of the social studies honor society at the school, was erected in 2015 opposite the school, along the roadway named for him some years after the school’s opening.

### Main source:

Brent Newton, “Thomas Sprigg Wootton: Maryland Patrician and Patriot,” *The Montgomery County Story*, Vol. 61, No. 2, Winter 2018-19,  
[https://mchdr.montgomeryhistory.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12366/240/mcs\\_v061\\_n2\\_2018-2019\\_welles\\_newton.pdf](https://mchdr.montgomeryhistory.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12366/240/mcs_v061_n2_2018-2019_welles_newton.pdf)

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<sup>1</sup> A Wikipedia assertion that Wootton “participated in the selling of enslaved people to the South” most likely refers to a different Thomas Wootton, given the location and time frame cited.