

## **Firebrand: U.S. Marshal Tench Ringgold and Early American Politics**

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Few U.S. Marshals served their district longer than Tench Ringgold. From April 28, 1818 until the expiration of his last term on February 4, 1831, he was an unheralded “behind the scenes” man. Prior to his service as U.S. Marshal, his escape route from the burning District of Columbia saved President James Madison from British capture, and he was dominant in rebuilding the city thereafter. His friendship with President James Monroe ensured the latter’s term, dubbed the “Era of Good Feelings,” as a virtual certainty for a decade within the fledgling capital. When the Marquis de Lafayette visited the town in late 1824, it was Ringgold who arranged the often-difficult processions and key meetings. While John Quincy Adams was President, he continued his support of Monroe’s policies. Only when President Andrew Jackson stained his reputation in his first term as chief executive did Marshal Ringgold finally go into private life. The political straits of these times were turbulent, but the many contributions of U.S. Marshal Tench Ringgold make him unique among others of his time.

Tench Ringgold was born near Chestertown, Maryland on March 6, 1776. His father Thomas was in the linen and cotton manufacturing business, and participated in various patriotic causes in his home state. In October 1776, Thomas Ringgold died, leaving his widowed mother and older brothers to raise the infant. In the 1790s, young Ringgold moved to Washington County, Maryland with his mother and brother Samuel. He thrived both in his father’s old manufacturing trade and a parallel political career. In September 1796, he set up a business in Georgetown and commuted between there and his home in Washington County for some years. His movements allowed him to represent his home district in the Maryland House of Delegates from 1804 to 1806. He further cemented his state political ties by marrying Mary Christian Lee, the daughter of Maryland Governor Thomas Sim Lee, in 1799. The couple had six children.<sup>i</sup>

Ringgold’s rise was due to ingenuity and good timing. His manufacturing gains included rope-making enterprises for outfitting sail-powered ships, one of only two based in a fledgling Washington, D.C. in 1809. With his brother, he owned several tavern businesses in Maryland port towns. He finally settled near Georgetown to concentrate on his business when several events overtook him. The first was the United States’ deteriorating relationship with Great Britain in 1812. Once war broke out that same year, the nature of his business fortunes would ebb and flow with the fortunes of the country. The following year his wife died.<sup>ii</sup>

Ringgold vigorously challenged these two setbacks. The 36-year-old widower quickly remarried. His second wife, Mary Aylett Lee, was from the Virginia branch of the same family as his first wife. Ringgold had some military experience as captain of a company of militia, and so he tried to assist in the disastrous campaign to defend Washington from British attack in August 1814. When the defenders hurriedly departed the city to avoid the oncoming attack, they blocked President James Madison’s escape route. Ringgold planned the route into Virginia. Further, he rode with Secretary of State James Monroe to alert First Lady Dolly Madison, who had just saved the famous Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington, of the President’s goal. The escape was successful, with three different groups splintering off and eventually joining in western Fairfax County, Virginia.<sup>iii</sup>

The escape solidified Ringgold's personal bond with Monroe and led to political appointments. He was one of three commissioners selected by President Madison to reconstruct the public buildings in the city that had been burned by the British. This important commission arranged loans and secured the services of master architect and designer Benjamin Henry Latrobe. By May 1816, the administrative tasks neared completion. Hearing U.S. Marshal Washington Boyd was considering resignation that year, Ringgold promptly wrote Madison about the job.<sup>iv</sup> On the day before Christmas 1816, he again wrote the outgoing Madison:

As it is extremely probable, that Mr. Boyd will shortly resign his appointment, in consequence of continued ill health, and incapacity to discharge its duties, the above letter will be essentially useful to me in the application which I have made to the President for the appointment. I therefore take the liberty to beg the favor of you to transmit it to me, if it is still in your possession.<sup>v</sup>

Although this letter was premature, politician Henry Clay wrote the new President James Monroe a strong recommendation letter in Ringgold's favor in late December 1817 with the "Understanding that the office of Marshall [sic] of the District of Columbia will probably be shortly vacated."<sup>vi</sup> In fact Marshal Boyd held on until April 1818, when he vacated the office.<sup>vii</sup>

U.S. Marshal Ringgold inherited the typical responsibilities of the office, but unique political ones as well. Ringgold was responsible for the 1820 federal census in the district, accounting for prisoners and monies for the federal courts, and civil processions that required extensive planning. An example of unusual circumstances was reflected in a letter to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in May 1818, when a few stone cutters "lately employed at the capitol [sic] of the United States" were charged with disorderly conduct and taken to the district prison. Ringgold felt the jailer was incompetent and the building unlikely to resist any rescue efforts. He asked Calhoun for the use of troops stationed at nearby Greenleaf's Point to temporarily stave off any would-be rescuers.<sup>viii</sup>

If Marshal Ringgold's business relations with Secretary of War Calhoun were sound, his friendships with Presidents Monroe and John Quincy Adams gave him unfettered access to one time-honored duty of escorting dignitaries. After his reappointment in early 1823 and, well into the second Monroe term, Ringgold's daily business changed because General Lafayette and his son visited the United States. The visit lasted an entire year, from August 1824 through September 1825. Lafayette's tour required someone with a logistical mind and the ability to conduct regularly secure movements in and out of the city. Washington's newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, mentioned that the General crossed to or from another jurisdiction, and Ringgold was mentioned in arranging arrivals or departures. In August 1825, Marshal Ringgold rode with President Adams and an entourage to Monroe's private home in Oak Hill, Virginia. When the President's carriage broke down, Marshal Ringgold walked while the others rode in a smaller vehicle. He posted the official notices of departure in the newspaper when necessary, as he did in early September 1825.<sup>ix</sup>

Notice-Gen'l Lafayette accompanied by Sec'y. of Navy & those persons who will attend him to the U.S. Frigate Brandywine, will embark on board the steam boat Mount Vernon at Cana's Wharf (late Brent's) by order of Tench Ringgold, Marshal of D.C.<sup>x</sup>

The civil processions of the period, including that of President Adams' 1825 inaugural parade, became large planned events. By tradition, the marshal of the district was in charge of the civil procession. The following year Ringgold acted as the chief coordinator during a state funeral and arranged for the hasty inclusion of President Adams, who had unexpectedly arrived home early from a visit to New England. When the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Convention called on the President in December 1826, Ringgold knew the large number of unescorted visitors meant disorder at the White House.<sup>xi</sup> Adams, always a man of details, wrote in his memoirs,

Mr. Ringgold, the Marshal, came to ask if I should wish his attendance here at the drawing-rooms for the preservation of order among the coachmen and carriages in the yard, as has been usual. He has lately lost his wife, and said he did not generally go into society, but that he would very readily attend here, considering it in the line of his duty. He did accordingly attend this evening, when Mrs. Adams held the first drawing-room for the season, a week earlier than usual, for the sake of the members of the Canal Convention, many of whom were here. The attendance was full, but not crowded.<sup>xii</sup>

There were plenty of daily duties that required Marshal Ringgold's attention. He posted regular "Marshal's Sale" notices in the *National Intelligencer* as directed by the Clerk's Office of the Circuit Court. These showed the seized assets function in its infancy, and usually contained lots of property auctioned to satisfy debts. The announcements noted the exact lot numbers and the full reason for the sale. In a single issue of the *Intelligencer* in December 1825, there were three announced sales, and two of these were held at local taverns.<sup>xiii</sup>

Insights into early federal executions were noted in the surviving writings of this period. One death penalty case during Marshal Ringgold's term was of particular note. President Adams noted in his memoirs in June 1827 that "Mr. Ringgold, the Marshal, came with a copy of the sentence of death passed by the Circuit Court of this District upon Jonathan De Vaughn, for the murder of Tobias Martin. It is to be carried into execution to-morrow..."<sup>xiv</sup> Adams commented on the marshal's duties in carrying out the execution.

Mr. Ringgold said he had been yesterday at Alexandria, and seen De Vaughn, and advised him to prepare for his fate, assuring him that he had no reason to believe there would be a respite of the execution. He has, until within a very few days, always flattered himself that there would, and he has been reckless of his condition. He is now somewhat softened, and has the spiritual assistance of Mr. Cornelius and of Mr. Harrison, Methodist preachers. He preferred them, though he told Mr.

Ringgold that he had been bred an Episcopalian. Mr. Ringgold and that Mrs. Mills, De Vaughn's sister, had applied to the Judges and to every member of the jury who tried De Vaughn, for a recommendation to mercy; but all had declined giving it.<sup>xv</sup>

The work relationship between the Chief Executive and the Marshal changed after the election of Andrew Jackson. Unlike Monroe and Adams, Jackson was suspicious of Ringgold from the beginning. Much of the suspicion originated from an old grudge. During an 1817 dinner honoring Jackson for his exploits in the Battle of New Orleans two years earlier, an ally of Jackson declared that the battle was won only because of the general, who lacked help from the Secretary of War at that time. The Secretary of War was none other than James Monroe, who took great offense at the remark and asked Ringgold to examine old departmental records to clear his name. Jackson's ally received a full statement from Monroe, and the ensuing back-and-forth letter writing became bitter. Ringgold and cabinet members recommended against any further airing of the matter.<sup>xvi</sup>

Trouble later developed between Jackson and Ringgold personally. During Jackson's inaugural procession, the Marshal was not entrusted to make the traditional arrangements, nor was he informed about changes Jackson wanted in the ceremony itself. Because of the recent death of his wife, President Jackson opted to walk to the Capitol instead of riding in the carriage. A committee formed by Jackson's political allies made Colonel Nathan Towson the "marshal of the day" and made their own arrangements for post-ceremony celebrations. This caused some consternation, and the result was both Ringgold and Towson were at either side of Jackson in the procession.<sup>xvii</sup>

Jackson tested Ringgold's patience on other matters and eventually pressured him into resignation. In October 1829 President Jackson officially wrote Ringgold he had received complaints that the keeper at the district prison was housing convicted persons in vacant space not assigned for that purpose. He was upset that criminals would be "awarded" as such, and ordered Ringgold to directly report to him on any persons in this status. In late 1830, former President Monroe became gravely ill. Marshal Ringgold attempted to patch up his friend's old dispute with Jackson. In January 1831, the President and his predecessor dined together. Marshal Ringgold told Jackson's cabinet members that Monroe actually backed Jackson during the Seminole War of 1817-18, but this was undermined by the bad feeling between Jackson and Vice-President John C. Calhoun. A communication from a former political rival surfaced that cast doubt on what Ringgold had said about Calhoun and Monroe being supporters. As political pressure mounted, the aged marshal found himself in an untenable position. He quickly resigned, inaugurating Jackson's pending sweep of the cabinet. His replacement was Henry Ashton, a local attorney and member of Jackson's inner circle.<sup>xviii</sup>

The end of Tench Ringgold's term meant the end of direct Madisonian influence within the federal government. Although Ringgold resigned his office, he maintained a presence and friendship with Monroe. It fell to him to write Madison about his old friend's death in July 1831. Ringgold's home, only a few blocks from the White House and now known as the Dacor Bacon House at 1801 F Street NW, was an active social hub with Supreme Court justices as regular guests. Ringgold sold it in 1836 in favor of a smaller residence. Death finally came to Tench

Ringgold on July 31, 1844. He was buried in the Congressional Cemetery – the very place he used to lead state funerals. Ringgold left a lasting legacy in his grandson, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Edward Douglas White. It can only be ironic that a man few remember did so much for his country—and as a U.S. Marshal.<sup>xix</sup>

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- i. Mildred Cook Schoch, *Ringgold in the United States* (Chester, MD: 1970), 29; *Ibid.*, 18; J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Western Maryland. Being a History of Frederick, Montgomery, Carroll, Washington, Allegany [sic], and Garrett Counties From the Earliest Period to the Present Day; Including Biographical Sketches of their Representative Men. Vol. II* (Baltimore, MD: Regional Publishing Co., 1968 [reprint]), 1023; J. Thomas Scharf, A.M., *History of Western Maryland. Being a History of Frederick, Montgomery, Carroll, Washington, Allegany, and Garrett Counties From the Earliest Period to the Present Day; Including Biographical Sketches of their Representative Men. Vol. I* (Baltimore, MD: Regional Publishing Co., 1968), 687; Scharf, *History, Vol. II*, 988; Schoch, *Ringgold*, 29.
  - ii. Wilhelmus Bogart Bryan, *A History of the National Capital From Its Foundation Through the Period of the Adoption of the Organic Act* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 527; Schoch, *Ringgold*, 29.
  - iii. Schoch, *Ringgold*, 29; Robert Ames Alden, *The Flights of the Madisons* (Fairfax County Council of the Arts, 1974), unnumbered page.
  - iv. Bryan, *A History of the National Capital, Vol. I*, 636; Tench Ringgold to James Madison, May 23, 1816, James Madison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.
  - v. Tench Ringgold to James Madison, December 24, 1817, James Madison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.
  - vi. H. Clay to James Monroe, December 26, 1817, in James F. Hopkins, ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay Volume 2 The Rising Statesman 1815-1820* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), 418-419. From DNA, RG 59, Applications and Recommendations for Office.
  - vii. *United States Marshals: 1789 to Present*, USMS Collections.
  - viii. Tench Ringgold to John C. Calhoun, May 27, 1818, in W. Edwin Hemphill, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun Volume II, 1817-1818* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1963), 313-314.
  - ix. Harry Ammon, *James Monroe-The Quest for National Identity* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 541; Notes of Artemas Herman, “General Lafayette’s Visit in 1924,” dated May 29, 1934, Marie J.G. du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette Collection, AC 4873, Box 2, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 550.
  - x. Notes of Herman, “General Lafayette’s Visit,” dated May 29, 1934, Lafayette Collection, AC 4873, Box 2, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division.

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- xi. Bryan, *History of the National Capital Vol. II*, 171; Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams comprising portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848*. (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), 155-156; Schoch, *Richmond*, 29; *Ibid.*, 199.
- xii. Adams, ed., *Memoirs*, 199.
- xiii. *Daily National Intelligencer*, December 13, 1825.
- xiv. Adams, ed., *Memoirs*, 295.
- xv. *Ibid.*
- xvi. Ammon, *James Monroe*, 558-559.
- xvii. Bryan, *History of the National Capital Vol. II*, 212-213.
- xviii. Andrew Jackson to the Marshal of the District of Columbia, October 15, 1829, in John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson Vol. IV 1829-1832* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1929), 81-82; Ammon, *James Monroe*, 566; Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Jackson Vol. IV 1829-1832*, 236; Bryan, *History of the National Capital Vol. II 1815-1878*, 224-225.
- xix. Tench Ringgold to James Madison, July 4, 1831, James Madison Papers, Library of Congress; William D. Calderhead, "The History of Dacor Bacon House," *Diplomatic and Consular Officers, Retired*, 1990; Congressional Cemetery, Washington, D.C., Burial Records.