In 1840, the last year of his life, when he was the only man in town to still wear his Revolutionary War period clothing, Thomas J. Bullitt would walk each day from his spacious home in Easton, Maryland up Dover Street to Washington, then turn right one long block to Easton National Bank, where he had served as President for the past 10 years.

Sometimes young boys would follow him, pointing at the swallow-tail coat, silver buckles on his black shoes, and laughing at his knee-high white socks and the pantaloons that ballooned out as he made his way along the gravel sidewalks, his eyes fixed straight ahead beneath a tri-corner hat.

If Bullitt heard their laughter, he did not respond. He was well aware that he was the last of a breed, one of the few remaining men of his era. Only old Sollie Barnett, who rang the ancient Courthouse bell twice each day and then drank off his wages each evening, remained alive after serving in the War for Independence. Bullitt himself had been a boy of 13 in Virginia — the same age as the youngsters teasing him today — when the Revolution began in 1776.

In a life begun with great prosperity, Thomas Bullitt had been faced with unusual calamity for the last 20 years. But now, in his final months, there were indications that positive changes were at last beginning to occur. As Thomas Bullitt walked to the Bank on a sunny September day in 1840, it is quite likely that he was casting his thoughts back to earlier times — to the post-Revolutionary War years when he first came to Talbot County, Maryland and set his course for life.

Thomas James Bullitt, one of seven children, was born in Fauquier County, Virginia on July 1, 1763. His father, Cuthbert, was a prominent attorney and State Superior Court Judge, and his uncle, Thomas, for whom he was named, was a renowned explorer who had claimed and surveyed all of the land that later became Louisville, Kentucky. In doing so, he had accumulated enormous wealth.

When Uncle Thomas died at age 48, he left his considerable holdings not to his wife, Sarah Brouard (who was rumored to have tricked him into marriage) but to his brother, Cuthbert — and through him, in a few years to come, to Thomas James and his older brother, Alexander.

It was, perhaps, this uncomfortable set of circumstances that caused Alexander to move to Kentucky, and Thomas to relocate to Easton, where he studied law under a prominent former Virginia "near relation," Gustavus Scott. At Cuthbert Bullitt's death in 1790, both brothers inherited substantial wealth and land holdings, which they moved quickly to liquidate and lease.

Census records of 1790 show a "Thomas Bullitt" married and living in Easton and having 10 slaves. His wife, the widowed Mary Colle, was in fact 10 years older than Bullitt; their first child, Elizabeth, was born that same year. A decade later, in 1800, the census and genealogy accounts reflect Mr. Bullitt, then 37, as having acquired two young sons, Alexander ('95) and Thomas ('98), plus "Betsey," now 10; an elderly woman (perhaps his mother-in-law), and, again, 10 slaves in his household.

Attorney Bullitt had also acquired, over those years, a reputation as an honest and sober practical man, and a wise businessman. One of his purchases had been an extensive piece of land in the heart of fast-growing Easton. On one parcel, facing Harrison Street, he built a house that was sold to the Stevens family. On another, on the corner of Harrison and Dover, Bullitt built the house that he would live in for the rest of his life.

...  

Even though fewer than 1,000 people resided here, Easton in 1801 was gaining a reputation as a town to watch, "rich and populous" as a brochure of the day described.

Formed in 1710 as Pitts Bridge, to serve as the seat for the new Talbot County Courthouse, Easton and its farming neighbors had benefited tremendously from the political and military turmoil suffered by Europe in the late-18th, and early 19th centuries. Unable to plant and harvest their own crops, European countries relied heavily on imports of corn, soy, wheat and tobacco from the abundant Delmarva Peninsula — and much of the resulting money was being spent in the Eastern Shore's only town of any size, Easton. Although tiny compared to Maryland's largest city, Baltimore, Easton was fast becoming known for its wealth. Few towns of its size on the east coast could boast of having a goldsmith, a drug store, a bookstore-printing office, a watch shop and a fancy carriage maker among its 17 thriving businesses on three city streets. In August 1801, a local newspaper ad announced that "J. Dukes, renowned miniature painter" had come to Easton to offer his services to local families.

Indeed, within just a few years of the turn of the century, Easton would boast the Eastern Shore's first modern hotel, its first newspaper, the Maryland Herald & Eastern Shore Intelligencer, founded in 1796, the first schooner line to Baltimore, and the Shore's first (and only) bank. There were two excellent private schools, Easton Academy and Robert Elliott School, where the Bullitt children no doubt attended. In 1808 a disastrous fire on Washington Street led to the formation, in April, of Easton's first fire company.

There were two taverns in Easton at the time — Prince's and Love's — which provided communal sleeping quarters for travelers, and served as theatres when entertainers came to town, such as the "live elephant" and its handlers in 1807. In a region widely known for being cutthroat and violent, Easton provided a welcome beacon of civility.

If there was a darker side to this era, it was Easton's thriving slave trade. Despite petitions against slavery by the rising Methodist Church, a typical advertisement in the Herald in 1801 read:

**WANTED TO PURCHASE**

*From 20-30 young Negroes, either separate or in families, for which liberal prices will be given in cash.*

The ad was signed by "Samuel Swan," who also served as Easton's chief of police.

Each Tuesday and Saturday, slave auctions were held at the Easton Courthouse, where black families were callously torn apart as parents, sons and daughters were sold to different parties. The auctions were typically attended by 75-100 purchasers, including mothers and children.

One of the most feared of the slave traders was Austin Woolfolk. Blacks were terrified of being sold to him, abused and tortured, then sent to Georgia. Although Easton slaves were generally well-treated, local owners often used Woolfolk as a threat to keep their slaves in line.

The slave population in Talbot County was not insignificant. The census of 1800 reported 8,616 free persons, and 4,775 slaves.

...  

The house that Thomas Bullitt built for his growing family — one of 200 dwellings in the town — took three years to construct, and was made of sturdy brick, painted white, and ornamented in the Federal style. During its construction, Bullitt and his family lived in rented quarters across the street known as the "Grimes
distaste for duels—his own father, Cuthbert, had become an unwilling participant in a duel that he was trying to stop in Virginia during Thomas’s boyhood, and had reluctantly killed a man.

One interesting result of a newspaper story occurred in 1802, when a political satire ran in the Herald, lampooning, among others, Jacob Gibson, the owner of Sharp’s Island. The anonymous author was soon identified as a young Easton physician, Dr. Enalls Martin.

Gibson and Martin were both large, muscular men, and when they met each other on Washington Street, a ferocious fight ensued. Gibson was a free-wheeling battler, while Martin, a physician, knew better where to place his punches. In the end, Jacob Gibson was felled with painful internal injuries.

From his bed in a nearby boardinghouse, Gibson summoned the “best doctor in town”—Enalls Martin. Martin dutifully wiped the blood from his own wounds and went to tend the very injuries that he had just inflicted. The two men enjoyed a warm and personal friendship for the rest of their lives.

For a successful man like Thomas Bullitt, who was one of Easton’s wealthiest residents, life in the early 1800s was filled with challenges and opportunities.

In 1805, a debate arose over whether a new bank should be formed in Annapolis, with a branch in Easton. Banking had long been monopolized by institutions in Baltimore, who set hard terms with local farmers and were quick to foreclose when loan payments were tardy.

A group of men including Thomas Bullitt prepared an advertisement in the Republican Star that read, in part: “So rich a country [as Talbot] cannot long remain without a great commercial city. Easton seems destined to take the lead.” Thus was formed the central argument leading to the creation of the Farmers Bank of Maryland, the Easton branch of which soon became Easton National Bank of Maryland—no longer just a branch, but an institution all its own.

Under Bullitt’s leadership, Easton National Bank had three iron-clad rules: 1) be open from 9-3 daily, except for Sundays, Christmas and July 4; 2) make loans for only 60 days, and 3) allow 4% interest on deposits of 60 days or more—the first bank in America to do so.

Easton National played a critical role in the success and maintenance of agriculture in the Mid-Shore region, providing a benign local institution that was more interested in helping the farmers than were the banks of Baltimore, which appeared to be more focused on acquiring their lands.

Perrin Smith, another friend and contemporary of Thomas Bullitt’s, owned a series of townhouses along Washington Street, just past the modern Court House, that is today the home of the Chesapeake Bay Yacht Club.

From these houses, Smith not only published the Republican Star, but also ran the local post-office, a used bookstore, and Easton’s primary printing office.

In the early 19th century, books were a rare commodity and had to be ordered in advance by customers. Individual copies would then be printed by the local printing houses, and bound by local craftsmen. On occasion, a shipment of books would arrive from an estate in Baltimore or Washington, and their sole would be a major occasion.

Despite its growing prominence, Easton was still a fairly remote area. Only two schooners provided travel to Baltimore—the Elnor at 9 am Wednesday, and a second schooner that left Saturday and returned Wednesday, carrying a maximum of 10 passengers.

Passage by water was preferred, since travel by stage was often difficult. Pulled by four horses, a stage that left Bill Lynch’s Easton stable at 4 am on a Monday, Wednesday or Friday, might reach Wilmington, DE by 7 pm that same day—depending, of course, on roads, weather and the occasional highwayman.

In 1811, a successful stock offering was held, raising money to create the first toll bridge across the Choptank River to provide faster access to Easton and St. Michaels by neighboring Delmarva farmers.

In this first decade of the 19th century, the residents of Talbot County, Maryland were concerned most of all about military matters. After losing the colonies 30 years earlier, England was now using its massive advantage as a sea power to harass, seize and search American vessels, and each new incident seemed to bring the young country closer to another war.

In 1807, Thomas Perrin Smith called an “indignation meeting” which led to a number of militia being formed under Brigadier General Perry Benson, a Revolutionary War veteran who had a withered right arm caused by a battle wound.

One of the many Easton militia to be formed was the “Town Watch,” started by Thomas Bullitt and made up of the town’s older and highly regarded citizens, the group with whom Bullitt, just 44 himself, felt closest. Through the years of 1808-1811, the various militia trained constantly, using “snappers”—wooden fascicles of muskets that, when snapped, made the sound of a musket being fired (since the state could not afford to provide them with real weapons.)

In 1811, as war inevitably came closer, a brick armory was built on land previously owned by Thomas Bullitt, and real weapons began to be acquired and stockpiled. Bullitt and other bank officers also directed that all of the gold deposits in Easton National Bank be transported by wagons to a safe and secret location in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Finally, in 1813, a British fleet actually invaded the Chesapeake Bay, ravaging small waterfront towns and seizing Sharp’s, Tilghman’s and Poplar Islands.

Gentlemen who are engaged in personal quarrels ought to know that the public are totally uninterested in their disputes, and believe that columns in newspapers ought to be better filled by (international news and essays.)

Attorney Bullitt probably shared Perrin Smith’s
Jacob Gibson, Dr. Martin’s former pugnacious opponent and the owner of Sharp’s Island, was one of the first local residents to be captured by the British invaders. Although they seized all of Gibson’s livestock, the British paid him for what they had taken and released Gibson and his slaves, who began making their way back to St. Michaels by barge, up Broad Creek.

It was at this time that the joke-loving Gibson, perhaps still aggrieved from his close escape, made a grievous error in judgment. First, he hoisted a red banner that resembled the British Union Jack over the barge. Next, he set one of his slaves to beating on an empty rum barrel like a martial drum. To all of the horrified people living along Broad Creek, Gibson’s barge looked just like the vanguard of a British invasion force.

Instant panic on land turned to fury when Gibson’s joke became known, and members of the St. Michaels Patriotic Blues militia had to be restrained from lynching him when the barge landed. Gibson quickly made an object apology at the Easton Court House, and then donated his payment from the British to the state government to avoid being accused of trading with the enemy. He also donated two cannon to St. Michaels, where they are still on display.

There were other skirmishes on Kent Island and at St. Michaels Harbor, including a supposed invasion by 11 small British boats at Parrot’s Point in August, 1813. Some reports of this event say that local militia retreated quite hastily; others claim that the small invasion never happened at all; but beyond that, Easton was never threatened, the British being unable to navigate the shallow streams, and fearful of being closed off or founded in a narrow neck of water.

The decision by its town fathers to build Easton inland rather than on the Chesapeake Bay itself – once considered a major error – now turned out to be a tremendous benefit. Its 602 miles of tidal shoreline had proved to be a formidable natural barrier to the British invasion of Talbot County.

Apart from the War, the Bullitt family and Easton had other issues to deal with during this time, many just as life-threatening.

On February 4, 1812, a massive earthquake shook the entire Washington-Annapolis-Easton area. Clocks stopped, building ornaments toppled, chandeliers swayed wildly. People reported being left ill with a “giddiness to the head.” In retrospect, this earthquake was perhaps the very first harbinger of disasters to come.

Later that same year, smallpox suddenly reared its head. Dr. Enalls Martin, now the town’s leading physician, led an effort to vaccinate everyone in Talbot County, which at that time included a much larger area of land than it does today, including all of Queen Anne’s and significant portions of today’s Caroline, Dorchester and Kent counties. Although the shots were offered for free, few people came. Martin eventually had to resort to writing in local papers of the terrible illnesses suffered by local families in order to scare patients into his office.

Unfortunately for the Bullitt family, one of the smallpox victims was their wife and mother, Mary, who passed away on Feb. 24, 1812, at age 55.

Then in 1813, on the heels of the smallpox scare came a major epidemic of typhoid influenza. Once again, Dr. Martin was at the head of a successful effort to head off the disease – but not until 500 of Talbot’s 15,000 residents had died.

During the epidemic, Dr. Martin was widely praised for casting aside old traditional methods of care (primarily venesection, or bleeding) and making use of “leading medical techniques” to save his patients. All of this from a physician who, when asked of the probable cause of the typhoid, attributed it to the 1812 earthquake combined with a later comet sighting. Even among the most advanced practitioners of the time, superstitions still reigned.

For several years after the War of 1812 ended in 1815, Easton appeared poised to resume its former prosperity. But that was not to be.

With the cessation of hostilities in Europe, farmers overseas were once again able to plant and harvest their own crops. The artificial boom that overseas trading had created suddenly ended, and with it, much of Easton’s prosperity.

In addition, the light shipbuilding industry that had sustained St. Michaels for so many years was no longer needed with the end of war. Instead, heavier cargo ships such as those built in New England were in favor. What’s more, the ready supply of cedar and white oak, used for generations to build Chesapeake Bay boats, was being depleted in Talbot County.

Between 1820 and 1840, Talbot County, and Easton in particular, fell into a hiatus of poverty and despair, accentuated by periods of drought, devastating illness, crop disease and infestation. It was as if Easton had been targeted for every Biblical malady known to man. Records of the time, for example, detail these calamities:

1812 Smallpox
1813 Typhoid influenza
1816 Corn crop failure
1817 Corn crop failure
1818 Overseas trade drops precipitously
1824 Crops ravaged by Hessian Fly
1825 Invasion of crop-eating caterpillars
1826 Severe drought
1827 Severe drought
1828 Huge hailstorms destroy wheat crops
1829 Disease devastates wheat crops

Almost overnight, Easton went from being an up-and-coming commercial hub to a small town with rutted dirt streets, surrounded by malarial-causing swamps. One travel writer of the time expounded, “to spend a few days in Easton was to ensure certain illness and possible death.”

Traveling performers began to shun the town, and the new, proud Easton Hotel with its individual private rooms sat empty many nights.

Left to their own devices, the citizens of Easton found creative ways to entertain themselves, many of which continue today. Small boat races on the bay became a mainstay activity. Huge fish roasts of drum, perch and rockfish, plus oysters by the barrel and quantities of rum and hard cider, were consumed in the summer months. Sunday worship activities centered around the 11:00 service took up that entire day. And of course, there was always politics.

By the 1820s, Thomas Bullitt had been appointed a Land Judge by the courts in Annapolis. Most positions at the time were, in fact, appointed, including Talbot County commissioners. But those elections that called for a popular vote – Congress, the State General Assembly, the U.S. President and the State Governor (after 1837) were occasions for large public gatherings and debates, accompanied by intrigue and high emotion.

As the 1830s arrived, circumstances in Easton only worsened. Actual money – gold and silver – was almost impossible to find, and even nickels and copper pennies were being hoarded. Many local stores resorted to issuing “shin plasters” – wallpaper-type certificates printed in Baltimore that enabled customers to barter with local stores in exchange for homemade store curiosities. When change from a purchase was due, the storekeeper would simply tear off an appropriately sized piece of the shin plaster, sign his name and date it.

At the post office, the early postal system required people to pay for the mail that they received, usually every three months. A letter from Baltimore could cost its recipient six or seven cents, while one from Texas might be 25 cents. The Easton postmaster found himself in trouble with his high-upers in Washington for extending credit when people could no longer afford the mail they were being sent – a situation that led to the advent of postage stamps in 1849.

All across the peninsula, times were hard. In 1826, a canal was proposed from the Choptank through Easton, to St. Michaels, but funding could not be raised. Seeking radical change and perhaps a larger tax base, the State of Delaware in 1833 moved to merge with Maryland’s Eastern Shore counties to form a new state of “Delmarva.” Although the idea came up again from time to time, nothing was done.

Foreclosures on land became commonplace, and valuable waterfront property in the 1830s was being sold for as little as $21 an acre. By 1837, Bullitt’s Easton National Bank had to suspend payments of cash for a time. Young people were leaving the town, lured by opportunities in the west. The number of saloons in Easton had risen from two to 10. Large farmers, facing less

Delmarva Quarterly Summer 2002
demand for their crops, took advantage of the
opportunity to "free" their slaves.
Still, at the same time, fish, seasonal crops
and wildlife were plentiful, and the cost of living
was low. Through their wits, farming, fishing and
hunting skills and bartering, the people of Easton
were able to survive — if just barely.

His later years could not have been the hap-
piest of times for Thomas Bullitt. Because
his beloved eldest child, Betsy, had mar-
ned William Hayward of Easton in 1810, and
had their first child the following year, when
Mary died unexpectedly in 1812, the 45-year
old Bullitt was left with the lone responsibility
of two sons — Alexander, 17, and Thomas, 14.

Tragically, on Oct. 11, 1821, Bullitt's "very
promising" second son, Thomas, died at age
21, and was buried with Mary in the family plot
at Whitemarsh Cemetery. Reportedly, an
estrangement also occurred between Bullitt and
his eldest son, Alex, over his marriage to a
woman from Baltimore, which Bullitt paid to have
dissolved after the death of their infant son.
Thus, for the last 19 years of his life, it
appears that Thomas Bullitt lived alone. At his
death, Elizabeth would inherit the Bullitt House
and Easton National Bank stock, and Alex,
apparently reconciled with his father, received all
of Bullitt's extensive landholdings in Quantico
and Fauquier County, Virginia.

With business severely restricted, the tall brick
wall with iron spikes surrounding Easton National
Bank, at the corner of Washington and
Goldsborough, must have seemed more like a
barricade some days than a symbol of institu-
tional strength. Faced with the death of the Bank's
president in 1830, Bullitt had taken on its presi-
dency that year, in addition to his duties as a
Land Judge.

By 1840, now in his 73rd year, Thomas
Bullitt must have gone over decades of memories
during the familiar ten-minute walk to and from
the Bank and his home. The past was undoub-
tedly a more pleasant place to dwell than the
present. Yet it was in Bullitt's last year that Easton
at last began to show signs of revival.

Long-avoided by visitors, Easton suddenly
found itself at the center of one of the largest politi-
cal rallies in the country's history. William Henry
Harrison (called "Tippecanoe" because of his vic-
tories along that Indiana river during the Indian
Wars) was championing the new Whig Party
against the incumbent, Martin Van Buren. All
across the country, other people who were suf-
tering through the same economic depression,
were demonstrating for change.

The culmination of Harrison's campaign
occurred that summer in Easton when a huge
meeting of all the Maryland Whigs turned into a
massive national debate attended by many of the
country's leading speakers. The ground that is
now Spring Hill Cemetery was covered for
weeks by more than 20,000 Whigs, ferried to
Easton by nine of the new steamboats that were
now providing new venues for trade as well as
fast, comfortable access to the Eastern Shore
communities. Tents, impromptu bars and picnic
tables groaning with local delicacies fed the mas-
sive contingent of politicians.

Stories from Easton were carried in newspa-
pers across the country, many of them favorably
reporting on the wonderful setting and hospitality
that the delegates received. In the space of
weeks, the forgotten town was rediscovered, and
in years to come, frequent steamboat stops in St.
Michaels, and then new roads and bridges,
would help to bring tourists, extend trade and
rebuild the local economies.

Fueled by the Easton convention, the Whigs
went on to a landslide victory in November —
although their candidate, Harrison, died after
only 31 days in office, and the party itself disint-
tegrated shortly afterwards.

Although he may well have attended the
Whig's convention, Thomas Bullitt could not
share in the joy of their victory — he died on
November 2, 1840, having seen the best of
times in Easton and Talbot County, and then the
worst — and, at the very end of a full life, glimps-
ing the promise of a glowing future.

The Bullitt House today is the headquarters of
the Mid-Shore Community Foundation, which
facilitates and promotes philanthropy through-
out the five county region. Michael J. Rowl is
President of the Foundation.

The Bullitt House, Easton, Maryland, is widely considered one of the finest remaining examples of early 19th century Federal architecture in the State of Maryland.