

Martha Custis Washington, Extraordinary

A Newlywed Mrs. Washington at Mt. Vernon:

1759-1760

I had the fortunate opportunity to spend time with Mrs. Washington shortly after her marriage to George on 6 January 1759. I recollect that husband George followed his in laws lead and called his wife “Patsy”, instead of her birth name of Martha. Patsy called her husband Colonel Washington in public and George when they were alone or just with family. The marriage was in the Custis Family New Kent White House, one of the first times I had set foot in that beautiful house.

I had first become endeared to Patsy at her New Kent County plantation on the Pamunkey river, the house in which Patsy was born. It was known as Chestnut Grove; its formal name was the Chestnut grove Plantation and it gave birth to Patsy on 2 June, 1731

It wasn't until much of that cold Washington winter had passed, that husband, wife and two kids (Jacky & little Patsy) in a carriage and George on a favorite horse¹, selected from many. Household slaves traveled last in this party that went from their Williamsburg Custis home to Mt. Vernon, some one hundred forty-two miles, likely a long six or seven day trip. If Thomas. Jefferson². had been along, he would have computed

¹ *George was called by several Colonial leaders as the best horseman of his age. However, at the time of his marriage he rode many horses and hadn't settled upon a favorite. Later favorites, Blueskin and Nelson, had not yet been foulded, or born into his stables.*

² *Thomas Jefferson. was not a Washington family friends so he would not have attended their wedding; and as J. J. wasn't much of a gift giver, even though very interested in pedometet's, he wouldn't have presented one as a gift—also because J. J. hadn't brought one from Europe until the mid-1780's.*

their average speed at around 3 miles an hour. Managing the whole trip was left up to John Alton, George's plantation manager as George hadn't begun to bother himself with housing matters and all was too new for his wife. As They prepared the night before, and I stopped by to give my best wishes, I did hear George ask John Alton to make sure that the central stair case be shinned to perfection.

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Talking with Patsy at Her New Mount Vernon Home. The house gift that I presented Patsy with, on the June day that I arrived was not a new gift. It was a tea set that she had really liked but couldn't see her way to pack it, and some mainly English teas that I had carefully collected from the left over shelves of a Williamsburg Apothecary. I knew my teas and that Patsy would really like the gift.

As I rode up the long straight western drive to Mount Vernon, I saw workers, likely slaves in the parterre gardens. Parterre gardens were a favorite in the capital area as once in place, stayed beautiful all year long and added shape and style to a plantation home. This formal garden is usually constructed on a level surface and made out of symmetrical planting beds, connected by gravel pathways. Beds are mostly full of bushes that thrive year around and may not contain flowers.

From some distance, the two and a half white story house stood out form all the green around it. The west vista was slopping, with tall trees on either side of it and led down to the Potomac River, quite wide at its home at Mount Vernon. Tall ships often passed by the home, much to the delight of Jacky,

on their way up the river ten miles to Alexandria, fast becoming a colonial port city.

I quickly learned that the guest wing that I was to stay in was also being visited by the Reverend Charles Green of Truro Parish. Our paths did not cross but I knew when he was in room as the smell of Iwin Reves, from the Old Colonial Tobacco company came drifting down the hall. I was familiar with it as it was one of my favorites when I imbibed a pipe.

I was able to catch Martha or Patsy³, just after dinner at 3:00pm in the afternoon. She had no cooking responsibilities and actually had arrived around 2:00 from a sidesaddle horse ride along the Potomac. Dinner was somewhat formal, with George if he was home, having bathed and powdered his hair⁴. We had little conversation and listened individually to a servant playing the harpsichord. It was the custom to have a late afternoon tea, where guests were greeted and that is when most visited. Rev. Green and I were the only guests at dinner and he disappeared somewhere with the Colonial after dinner.

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Patsy, I am so charmed to be here at your Mt. Vernon home.

Squire, no need for formality; you are family as you have known us for years. Before I forget, thank you for bringing my favorite tea set and the teas. I didn't have room to pack it when we came here and it has been a favorite for years.

³ She went by both names, depending on who was speaking to her. Her daughter was known as little Patsy until her teens, so there was little name confusion there.

⁴ Although given to other Colonial customs, George refused to wear a wig and never did. He was blessed with his own hair up until his death.

I aim to please. I knew that was a favorite that had to be left behind because of lack of space. . . please, may I press on to other history?

Certainly Squire, I know you are also a gentleman and will not ask things I don't want to discuss.

Mrs. Washington, this is your second marriage and you now have had to move twice. How has it been?

The only thing that brings tears to my eyes now days is to think about my dear Daniel . We were such a good pair and so much in love. I never expected to lose him, so quickly, after only after seven years of marriage. I think Daniel never expected to die either as he hadn't yet finalized a will.

Yes, word is, that you were a wealthy woman and that may be what attracted George to you?

You have a way with words Squire, and yet are so bold. . . My dowry was an attractive 'card' but so was I. Even though I was very much still grieving my loss of my husband Daniel, at the same time I was really attracted to George W.—and I could tell he was to me. We had an immediate mutual attraction. For our times, our courtship was quite short.



Made of purple silk, these shoes are believed to have been worn by Martha Dandridge Custis during her wedding to George Washington. They not only reflect Martha's status as a wealthy widow but also her youthful exuberance. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association)

Sounds like you both were ready for each other and fortunate helped out. . . Tell me about your grieving-loving conflict.

I was still loving my first man who had left me via unexpected death at my age of twenty-six, when into my life comes this tall, military soldier, with the most proper customs, very handsome, and if I may say only to you, he stirred me up inside very much.

In addition to this mutual attractiveness, I think I offered George much of what he wanted in a wife. . . He had not yet been to the matrimonial alter. . . I had been able to learn much in my growing up years, could read and write, and knew a lot about managing a plantation—I also learned on the job as my first husband brought into the marriage nearly 300 slaves and 17,500 acres of land; I now had personal worth of more than 40,000 pounds. Because my dear husband also hadn't thought he would be dying, he hadn't made up his will and I became the executor of his estate. That freed me from the strictness of coverture and meant that I had most of the same legal rights as Colonial men. Not only did I bring a proper dowry; I had the skills to manage it!

If you were destined to widowhood, you were in a good place. If another marriage was in your destiny, you brought much to enable it!

Yes and No. I had great resources but really didn't seek the adventure and challenges as a man would. I was glad to not have to follow that path. My first marriage was so good, we were very intimate and good for each other that I wanted more of that. With George W., I could feel that possibility.

As it would be for any woman of those times, were children in your plans?

Squire, you boldly push on. George and I have only been married for months and you ask about that!

Just an inquiry My lady, we can move on to other matters.

I don't mind you knowing my Squire, that making babies is something both George and I want to do. I will enjoy the bedding down and the fruits of our labor. Making and having them has always been an act of great joy. You know that Daniel gave me four children?

Yes, I have met them all at your New Kent County "White House".



There is Daniel Parke Custis, born on November 19, 1751, and named after your husband. Then, once you'll had the male heir in place, along came a daughter, Francis Parke Custis, on April 1753. I believe those are both traditional family names, with the middle name meeting the strict condition the children's great-grandfather had imposed: only children bearing the name "Parke" as part of their given name would receive a portion of the family estate.

The Second Two Custis Children

Oh Squire, my heart suddenly goes sad. Despite giving these two precious ones our best care and socially and economically privileged lives, both Daniel and Frances passed on before they reached the age of five. In 1754 Daniel died, probably of malaria; Frances died in 1757. Of what, we do not know.

Oh my, what a loss. Then you quickly tried to replace them?

Of course. John Parke Custis ("Jacky"), was born in 1754, and Martha Parke Custis ("Patsy"), followed, born in 1756. Somehow, my womb knows to produce a male child first.⁵

These two were the idol of our eyes. They readily came with me into my marriage with George as he took to them immediately and in his quest to have a large family, he felt he had already begun. So both took the last name of Washington and were dearly loved by both of us---soon, keep this to yourself, my Dear Squire, we will have more small ones in our large family to be!⁶

I look forward to that news and will have silent lips now on this happening.

One last inquiry. Your husband George is not a college man, William and Mary's loss. Instead, he was trained to be a surveyor, one who uses specialized instruments to identify

⁵ *Unfortunately, what Martha could not know at that time, but history does, is that George and she would have to experience the death of both children during their marriage time—not an unusual happening but one that brought with it great despair and loss. Patsy suffered from repeated seizures, which grew worse over time. After a particularly violent episode on June 19, 1773, Patsy died at age seventeen. On November 5, 1781, just weeks before he turned twenty-seven, John Parke Custis, Martha's sole remaining child, contracted a virulent illness and died.*

and mark the precise boundaries on a piece of property. Knowledge of the key land parcels came with the job; isn't that how George acquired Mount Vernon, your new home?

Indeed, we did learn about Mt. Vernon's availability that way. Our leaders are encouraging us to find a plantation and farm it. As that is George's first love-for a job that is---He has stated that he is done with warring and just wants to grow things. We have great plans for our home and the land.

My lady, thanks for all you have shared. I hope I may return in a few years to see all the progress on these plans and this time, to visit with both you and Mr. Washington.

Squire, since when have you ever called him "Mr. Washington?" You are family, we are George and Martha, and you are welcome here anytime.

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Steed was ready so early next morning I left, somehow knowing I would be back many times. Greatness of some type would come from here.

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Famous Quotes from Martha Washington

"The greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances."

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Wisdom of The Squire

Martha is only known for one memorable quote and it is above. Not all leaders are vocal leaders; Martha Custis Washington was a Colonial Leader by thought and action.

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