"An atmosphere of constraint and severity has, for some reason, seemed to surround the home life of Mount Vernon, perhaps in consequence of the traditional punctuality, method, and dignity of the master and mistress of the household, and also because the historians of Washington have simply given us the outlines of his home life, without those intimate personal details which, like the lights and shadows in a painting, are as essential to its completeness as the sharper strokes."¹

On February 26, 1828, historian Jared Sparks recorded the following entry in his journal:

I visited Mrs. Peter of Georgetown today. She was the granddaughter of Mrs. Washington. My principal object was to ascertain what became of General Washington's letters to his wife. Mrs. Peter assured me that, shortly after General Washington's death, Mrs. Washington burnt all these letters except two which seemed to escape by accident. Mrs. Washington gave her writing desk to Mrs. Peter, and in this desk were found two letters from General Washington to her. No others have ever been found. One of these is exceedingly valuable, being a letter written by General Washington to his wife communicating the intelligence of his having been appointed commander-in-chief [and] expressing his entire conviction that he was not adequate to so high a trust. It has never been printed.²

Sparks was strategically situated to record this conversation and make this observation. In 1825, while serving as editor of the North American Review, he began to collect and edit the writings of George Washington. He examined Washington's papers in the public archives of all thirteen states and reviewed Washington's papers at Mount Vernon. Sparks published twelve volumes of Washington's papers between 1834 and 1838. While historians acknowledged the purpose and comprehensiveness of this collection, he often refined the language of the letters and diaries which drew criticism. Undaunted, Sparks defended his work, then produced a two-volume abridged version of Washington's life in 1840.³

Sparks's journal entry is the first source which notes the destruction of the personal correspondence of Martha and George Washington. Other confirmation has not surfaced, but...
“It has been determined in Congress, that the whole army raised for the defense of the American Cause shall be put under my care…”

as only three letters survive to this day written by George Washington to his wife, in an age when the pen was the prime mode of communication, we can accept Martha Peter’s words as recorded by Sparks as truth until proven otherwise.4

Mrs. Peter was Martha Parke Custis (1777-1854), a daughter of Martha Washington’s son John Parke Custis (1754-1781) and his wife Eleanor Calvert Custis (1777-ca.1757). In her will, Martha Washington bequeathed to this granddaughter “…my writing table and the seat to it standing in my chamber, also the print of Genl. Washington that hangs in the passage.”5 According to Peter family legend, two letters were found in the desk, one dated June 18, 1775, and the other June 23, 1775. Debate about the presence of these letters continues to this day. Did Martha Washington leave them there as proof of the depth of their relationship? Were the letters intended to be destroyed but somehow overlooked? Or, as one historian has suggested, did Martha Washington’s granddaughter Eleanor Custis Lewis, a prominent member of the Mount Vernon household who attended her grandmother closely through the difficult days after the death of George Washington, realize their value and place them in the desk to prevent loss or destruction by her grandmother?6

Both letters found in the desk at Tudor Place were written by Washington to his wife from Philadelphia. The letter Sparks identified as “exceedingly valuable” was composed just as Washington learned that he was appointed to take command of the Continental Army; this letter remains at Tudor Place to this day.7 Sparks was correct in his assumption that this document was historically valuable, but his statement, “It has never been printed,” is no longer correct. The letter has been printed many times in volumes of American history for the very reason that Sparks identified: it “expresses his [Washington’s] entire conviction that he was not adequate to so high a trust.”

But seen in another light, a careful review of the letter discloses the personal relationship that existed between George and Martha Washington and foreshadows the struggle they both would endure for the next seven years—a tug of war between duty and domicile. The author of the letter was a military man by training who wrote this letter to his wife positioning himself for attack on the theory that a strong defense was the best offense. Knowing the contents of it would prove disheartening, Washington boldly defended his decision to accept the command, then tempered his defense with offensive reasoning.

He defended his acceptance of the command as he notified his wife: “It has been determined in Congress, that the whole army raised for the defense of the American Cause shall be put under my care, and that it is necessary for me to proceed immediately to Boston to take upon me the command of it.” He told her further, “But, as it has been a kind of destiny that has thrown me upon this Service, I shall hope that my undertaking of it, is designing (sic) to answer some good purpose…” [June 18, 1775, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Collection of Tudor Place]

He appealed to her sense of honor, for the age of chivalry was not dead:

…it was utterly out of my power to refuse this appointment without exposing my Character to such censure as would have reflected dishonour (sic) upon myself, and given pain to my friends- This I am sure could not, & ought not to be pleasing to you, & must have lessened (sic) me considerably in my own esteem.

Consequently he rested his case with the words, “I shall rely therefore, confidently, on that Providence which has heretofore preserved (sic), & been bountiful to me, not doubting, but that I shall return safe to you in the fall.”

Congress? Destiny? Honor? Providence? Washington knew that to turn against any of these forces was not in his wife’s nature and to do so would have been a sacrilege for any man or woman in the eighteenth century. He chose his weapons as wisely as a soldier surveys the terrain and seeks safe ground.

He then softened the blow of his departure with strong offensive reasoning, turning quickly and gracefully from military officer to husband, anxious to ease the anxiety his wife would feel upon learning of Congress’ decision and the fact that her husband bowed to it so willingly:

I shall feel no pain from the Toil, or the danger of the Campaign- My unhappiness will flow, from the uneasiness I know you will feel at being left alone- I therefore beg of you to summon your whole Fortitude & Resolution, and pass your time as agreeably as possible-nothing will give me so much sincere satisfaction as to hear this, and to hear it from your own Pen.
He assured her that as far as the command went,

You may believe (sic) me, my dear Patcy, when I assure you, in the most solemn manner, that, so far from seeking this appointment I have used every endeavour (sic) in my power to avoid it, not only from my unwillingness to part with you and the family, but from a consciousness of its being a trust too great for my capacity, and that I should enjoy more real happiness and felicity in one month with you, at home, than I have the most distant prospect of reaping abroad, if my stay was to be Seven times Seven years.

But wisely, although he did not doubt that he would return in the fall, Washington took the precaution of having a will drafted for her protection. Not willing to dwell long upon such matters, he presented his case, sent regards to neighbors and friends, and bid her farewell.

And yet he came back on the stage for one last important curtain call: “Since writing the above I have received your letter of the 15th, and have got two suits of what I was told was the prettiest Muslin. –I wish it may please you –it cost 50/ a suit that is 20/ a yard.” He did indeed send the requested muslin to Martha Washington; his personal account ledger at the Library of Congress for June 20, 1775, records: “By Cash for 2 suits of muslin for Mrs. Washington L5.00.” At the moment he announced his election to lead the American revolutionary forces against the mother country, he stopped to please his wife with a purchase in the midst of this life-altering event.

Washington’s post script to her is perhaps his crowning offensive achievement.

Who was the keeper of this letter that Sparks had identified as “exceedingly valuable”? The answer to this question may lie in the record of Judge James Iredell (1750-1799), who took a meal during Washington’s presidency in Philadelphia. He attended a dinner at the President’s house and recorded: “There is now there an elderly sister of Miss [Nelly] Custis’s not so handsome as herself, but she seems to be very agreeable.’ This ‘elderly sister,’ Martha Custis, who was about eighteen at the time, became the wife of Mr. Thomas Peter of Georgetown.”

According to the approximate age assigned to Martha Peter, the dinner to which Judge Iredell refers may have occurred during the months of February-March 1794, in which Mrs. Robert Peter (1744-1821) escorted Eliza Custis and Martha Custis to Philadelphia. A letter written by Martha Washington to her sister Fanny Bassett Washington on February 15, 1794, related: “Mrs Peter set out on the same day that you did on Monday and arrived hear (sic) fryday (sic) night much fatigued (sic) –the girls had both (sic) had (sic) colds since they gott (sic) hear (sic)…”

In a March 2, 1794, letter to her sister, Martha Washington noted, “…from what I can hear Patty and Mr Peter is to make a match –The old gentleman will comply with Doctor Stuart’s bargain … if it is so I shall be very happy to see her settled with a prospect of being happy- I really believe she is a very deserving girl- …”. On March 9, 1794, Martha Washington added, “I wish with all my heart that Patty may doe (sic) well –it would give me much pleasure to hear that she was married (sic).” Martha Washington wrote her sister again on March 9, 1794: “Mrs Peter has been with me five weeks Betsy [Eliza Parke Custis] thinks of staying with me and let Patty [Martha Parke Custis] go down without her. Mr [Robert] Peter [1726-1806] talks of going from this place about the 16th which will be next Monday…” The purpose of this visit may have been for Mr. and Mrs. Robert Peter to establish good relations with Martha Custis’ grandmother and stepgrandfather, for Martha Custis and Thomas Peter were married January 6, 1795.

Martha Custis would have been seventeen years old at the time of this extended stay, turning eighteen on December 31, 1794. It was this “elderly sister,” placed in birth order between the mother country, he stopped to please his wife with a purchase in the midst of this life-altering event.

At the moment he announced his election to lead the American revolutionary forces against the mother country, he stopped to please his wife with a purchase in the midst of this life-altering event.

Notes
1 Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, Martha Washington (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897), 159-160.
4 A third letter from George Washington to Martha Washington is held in the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island. The letter was written from Verplanck’s Point, New York, on October 1, 1782, for James Brown. Brown wished to travel south and Washington wrote a short note to
his wife introducing him. Brown, however, went only as far as Baltimore, returned home, and did not reach Mount Vernon.

5 John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. The Last Will and Testament of George Washington and Schedule of his Property to which is appended the Last Will and Testament of Martha Washington (Mount Vernon, Virginia: The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1939, reprint 1992), 57. Fitzpatrick notes that the French desk was bought by Washington for his wife in 1790 from the Comte de Moustier, 64, footnote 14. The desk was returned to Mount Vernon by a relative.

6 The idea that Nelly Custis Lewis or another family member intervened to save these two letters came from a lecture by Ellen McCallister Clark, Library Director, The Society of the Cincinnati, Washington, D.C., “Reading Between the Lines: The Books and Letters of Martha Washington,” given at Mount Vernon in November 2002.


9 All textiles were precious during Martha Washington’s lifetime, but muslin, defined at the time as “a fine stuff made of cotton,” was one of her recurring favorites. In a letter to her sister Anna Maria Dardrige Bassett on November 18, 1777, Martha Washington asked her to give a piece of muslin as a gift to a friend “…with my compliments – “, Fields, 174-175; on June 8, 1789, she wrote to another sister, Fanny Bassett Washington, “My Hair is set and dressed every day – and I have put on white muslin Habits for the summer you would I fear think me a good deal in the fashion if you could but see me – “…”, Fields, 215-216; as late as March 23, 1794, she noted to Fanny Bassett Washington again, “I have at last sent you the piece of muslin I promised – I should have sent it to you sooner but I really could not find a piece that I thought was fine enough … “, Fields, 263-264.

TUDOR PLACE BOOK

Tudor Place: America’s Story Lives Here, a richly illustrated book exploring the residents, collections, architecture, and landscape of this historic estate is now available for purchase. Published in partnership with the White House Historical Association, the book was edited by former Executive Director Leslie Buhler, and includes contributions by authors William C. Allen, Erin Kuykendall, and Patricia Marie O’Donnell. New photography by Bruce M. White complements many historic images of Tudor Place and beyond. It also includes sections highlighting the Washington Collection and the richness of the Tudor Place Archive. The foreword by historian Joseph Ellis sets the stage for this beautiful and informative publication. Gratitude is extended to Leslie Buhler for her tireless effort to ensure the quality of this publication, as well as everyone who assisted her with this project and our publishing partners at the White House Historical Association.

Tudor Place: America’s Story Lives Here can be purchased at the Tudor Place Museum Shop or our online shop for $49.00 (Tudor Place members receive a 10% discount). This is a must for everyone who loves Tudor Place and will make a great gift for family and friends.

We are pleased to welcome Jayne H. Plank and JoAnn L. Zuercher to the Tudor Place Foundation Board of Trustees. Jayne and JoAnn were elected by the Board at their June meeting for interim terms. Their full terms will commence in December.

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Dear Friends,

My first year at Tudor Place has been memorable. I had the good fortune of arriving just weeks before our bicentennial began. For the past nine months we have commemorated our 200th year through unusual events and activities that celebrated Tudor Place’s storied past, promoted an awareness of who we are today, and prepared us for our third century.

Despite a persistent threat of showers, the final weekend of April was a shining moment at Tudor Place as we hosted replicas of George Washington’s dining and sleeping tents. With every detail and furnishing authentically reproduced by its sponsor, the Museum of the American Revolution, the tent enthralled hundreds of visitors while awakening their interest in Washington’s legacy here. It also provided a richly atmospheric setting for the historically themed dinner we hosted, the first ever held in the replica tent.

For guests at the Bicentennial Spring Garden Party, on May 25, the Bicentennial provided a different kind of encounter with the past. Costumed interpreters, representing Thomas and Martha Peter, Britannia Peter Kennon, and other family members, as well as servants who labored on the estate and others, relived memorable events from Tudor Place’s past. The grounds themselves were festooned with objects reminiscent of the estate’s heritage. Garden Party Chair Marcia Mayo missed no detail to ensure that those who attended the party would long remember it.

In June, we hosted the Peter Family Reunion, attracting over 60 members from as far away as Alaska and California. Special tours, family history presentations, and other engaging activities allowed Peter descendants to connect to their lineage and recognize the importance of the work we do here.

A Tudor Place-shaped cake was the centerpiece of our Independence Day celebration, “Happy Birthday America, Happy Birthday Tudor Place.” With American flags waving from the Temple Portico, hundreds of visitors from throughout the region celebrated our 200th and America’s 240th with historic games, patriotic crafts, and the writing of colorful postcards to service members overseas.

September has seen the long-awaited arrival of Tudor Place: America’s Story Lives Here, the lush book published in cooperation with the White House Historical Association. With richly informative essays on the families, architecture, collections, and gardens of Tudor Place, this beautifully illustrated work testifies to the special character of this place and provides a lasting reminder of this commemorative year.

A culinary commemoration has yet to come, with “Taste of Tudor Place” on October 22. This edible history experience will feature a variety of heritage foods and distinctive beers, wines, and spirits representing notable eras in Tudor Place’s and our nation’s past. VIP tickets are almost sold out for this event, so look for information in this newsletter and on our website to reserve your place.

As I enter my second year and Tudor Place its 201st, we will build on the special year and memorable events that introduced us to new audiences and new dimensions of our organization with those who already knew us. The Bicentennial has provided an occasion to reflect and celebrate, while also launching us into our next hundred years. Our thanks extend to all who made the year great. Stay with us to see what happens in our Third Century!

Mark Hudson
Taste of Tudor Place and Other Upcoming Events

Taste of Tudor Place
An Edible History Experience
October 22 from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m.
As the concluding event of our Bicentennial celebration, we invite you to sample a variety of heritage foods and distinctive beers, wines, and spirits representing notable eras in Tudor Place's and our nation's past. One ticket covers everything: site admission, complimentary tasting glass, and tastings of local and historic drinks, savories, and treats.

Special VIP Admission includes an exclusive noon reception with private tastings, gift bag, and a unique guided tour, “Tudor Place Eats,” exploring the culinary aspects of the mansion, grounds, and smokehouse.

Guests must be 21 or older. Space is limited and pre-registration is required. Visit the Calendar of Events at tudorplace.org to register or for more information. To register by phone or email contact Felice Herman, 202.580.7321 or fherman@tudorplace.org.

VIP Admission: $75 | General Admission: $60

Landmark Society Lecture: Bonny Wolf—America Eats at Tudor Place
October 5 from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.
A longtime journalist and contributor to NPR's award-winning Weekend Edition, Bonny Wolf will share the history of dining at Tudor Place and how the Peter family reflects the history of American food. Bonny is the author of “Talking with My Mouth Full — Crabcakes Bundt Cakes and Other Kitchen Stories” and the managing editor of American Food Roots.
Free for Landmark Society Members | $15 for Members | $20 for Non-Members

Tudor Nights: The Desk Set
October 13 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.
Join us for cocktails, hors d’oeuvres, and a close-up interaction with office and desktop objects both functional and handsome from the Tudor Place collection.
Free for Members | $20 for Non-Members

Landmark Society Lecture: Steven Pincus—The Heart of the Declaration
October 20 from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.
As the national election approaches Yale professor Steven Pincus will discuss the defining question that distinguishes the country's political parties: Should the government play a major or a minor role in the lives of American citizens? In his newly published, meticulously researched book, The Heart of the Declaration, Steven Pincus shares a new perspective on the influences that shaped the founders as well as the nation's founding document.
Free for Landmark Society Members | $15 for Members | $20 for Non-Members

Trick or Treat at Tudor Place
October 29 from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
Wear your Halloween costume and find treats in the enchanting North Garden. Enjoy pumpkin-decorating and other crafts, face painting, and outdoor games amid lovely autumn color.
Member Child: $5 | Non-Member child: $10 | Accompanying adult: $3

Veterans Day: Generations of Service
November 11 from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Experience tours of Tudor Place highlighting the military service of Peter family members.
Free for Members | Regular museum admission fee for Non-Members
Holiday Decorations circa 1945

Tudor Place soon will be decorated for the holiday season...circa 1945. The theme for this year's decorations is “Home for the Holidays,” harkening back to Christmas celebrations here as World War II ended. This was an especially meaningful Christmas for the Peters family as Armistead Peter 3rd returned from service in the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific, to his wife, Caroline, who spent much of the war volunteering with the Red Cross as a nurse’s aide at Georgetown Hospital.

As the nation celebrated its first peacetime yuletide in five years, President Truman declared a four-day weekend for Federal employees and wartime rationing was lifted on all commodities except sugar.

For Armistead and Caroline, the holidays once again meant being surrounded by family. The previous year, Caroline had spent Christmas Day at Georgetown Hospital, while Armistead spent it in an officer's club on a South Pacific island where the only hint of Christmas was a large poster he painted showing Santa Claus “with one foot planted in a miniature snow-covered countryside...and his other foot on a Pacific Island with a violent volcano in the distance and palm trees along the shore.” Due to military censorship, he couldn't even disclose his location in the Christmas Day letter he wrote to Caroline.

When he returned to Washington a year later, Armistead brought a large trunk filled with objects he acquired while traveling after the end of the war. He had purchased antiques, weapons, artwork, and even textiles to bring back to the United States. His travels also allowed him to further indulge his interest in Japanese culture and architecture; his letters home to Caroline were filled with sketches of traditional houses, market scenes, and people he saw during these trips through the countryside. Many of the objects he acquired in Japan remain in the Tudor Place collection and will be displayed as part of the holiday installation.

As it does every year during the holidays, the house will come alive with the sights, sounds, and decor from the past. There will be many opportunities to see the holiday decorations in December: Tudor Nights, an evening candlelight tour, or during a regular daytime tour.

—Grant Quertermous, Curator

Holiday Events

Deck the Halls: A Family at Christmas
December 3 from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m.
Explore the historic mansion as a History Detective, finding decorations and clues to Christmas celebrations past. Nibble on cookies, write a letter to Santa, sing with carolers, make yuletide crafts, and enjoy refreshments throughout an afternoon of warm merriment.
Non-Member Child (under 12): $10 | Non-Member Adult (12+): $5 | Tudor Place Member Child (under 12): $8 | Tudor Place Member Adult (12+): $3

Candlelight Tours
December 6, December 8, December 20, December 21 from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m.
Experience the elegant mansion, set to Christmas 1945, on a holiday tour lit by candlelight. Pause for warm cider and home front refreshments inspired by 1945 war rationing, then don vintage fashions in our photo booth. Great for history lovers and Christmas enthusiasts alike!
$10 Tudor Place Member | $20 Non-Members

Tudor Nights: Home for the Holidays
December 7 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.
See the historic house bedecked for the holiday, and learn about World War II life overseas and on the capital home front from the Peters’ correspondence and belongings and the stories they tell.
Free for members | $20 for non-members
Tudor Place will be offering a variety of wreath making workshops throughout December, including several new offerings. We are grateful to our partners at Georgetown Presbyterian Church for their assistance with the workshops. Please visit tudorplace.org for dates, details, and registration information.

Welcome, Lisa!

This summer, Lisa Manderson joined the Tudor Place team as our facilities manager. A native of Florida, Lisa became interested in historic preservation as she saw her hometown of Pensacola address the challenge of balancing the need for new development with honoring the heritage of that historic city. She is a graduate of the University of West Florida and recently completed graduate studies in historic preservation at Savannah College of Art and Design. Since arriving at Tudor Place, Lisa has enjoyed researching the history of the house and discovering its many quirks. In addition to ballet dancing, hiking and camping, she enjoys spending time with her dog, Tide.