

**Property, Ownership, and Legacy:
The Importance of Widowhood to Britannia Peter Kennon**

Nora Pehrson, Tudor Place Education Intern

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Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon was born in 1815 and died in 1911. She lived for nearly a century and witnessed the new Republic, Jacksonian democracy, the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, and the dawn of the twentieth century. The majority of her life—nearly fifty years—was spent as a widow. “Although she had many admirers,” after being widowed in 1844, as her great-grandson Armistead Peter 3rd recalled, she chose to remain single for the rest of her life.¹ In a time when the social status of women was so closely connected to the status of their fathers or husbands, why didn’t Britannia remarry? What might her motivations have been? The surviving evidence doesn’t give a definitive answer. By situating Britannia in the broader context of her time, specifically by looking at challenges to the cult of domesticity and especially to coverture laws, we can develop a better understanding of how Britannia’s long widowhood affected not only her own life, but the fate of Tudor Place. Her decision to remain a widow allowed her to own and control the estate, which, remarkably, remained in the same family for six generations. Her “tenacity and perseverance,” Armistead Peter 3rd declared, “did as much as anything in the world to preserve this house to the present day.”²

In her “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes” of 1837, Sarah Grimké, the abolitionist and advocate for women’s rights, asserted that the American woman was “a cipher in the nation” because marriage rendered her invisible in the eyes of the law.³ In retrospect, we can see

¹ Armistead Peter, 3rd, *Tudor Place: Designed by Dr. William Thornton and Built Between 1805 and 1816 for Thomas and Martha Peter* (Washington, DC: Armistead Peter, 3rd, 1969), 10.

² *Ibid*, 41.

³ Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, Letter XII, 1837, at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminarsflvs/Grimke%20Letters.pdf>

Grimké's analysis as a call to action. Her letters invoke Enlightenment ideals, which were the basis of the American Revolution, to show how the United States was not living up to its foundational principles. In recent years, historians have drawn on Grimké's writings to argue that in the 1830s and 1840s, when Britannia was set to be married, property laws in general and coverture laws in particular were evolving. For instance, historian Norma Basch has noted that during the Jacksonian era "subtle shifts in concepts about women... were emanating from the 'dominant' or male legal and political cultures." Specifically, she argues that incremental changes to female property rights contributed to a burgeoning women's rights movement and helped establish the legal basis for more equitable distribution of resources and for civic and political equality for women.⁴ The legal scholar Linda Kerber, meanwhile, has looked at landmark lawsuits in the Jacksonian Era that attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to challenge coverture laws, arguing that they contradicted Republican values by denying women civic rights.⁵ Most recently, Rebecca Traister's book *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* has charted the status of the unmarried woman in American history, starting with an overview of women's rights and marriage in the colonies. She notes that the earliest stages of the women's rights movement took place at the time of the American Revolution, when socially affluent white women first began to question marriage as the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Traister argues that this early feminism was related directly to Republican ideals: "The language of individual liberty was sharply at odds with the limitations put on some of America's inhabitants... by marriage."⁶

⁴ Norma Basch, "Equity vs. Equality: Emerging Concepts of Women's Political Status in the Age of Jackson," *Journal of the Early Republic* 3, no. 3 (Autumn, 1983): 297.

⁵ Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Rights to Be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 15.

⁶ Rebecca Traister, *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 43.

Republican and Revolutionary rhetoric would surely have resonated with Britannia. She was a direct descendant of Martha Washington, and her parents, Thomas and Martha Peter, were ardent Federalists who hosted political gatherings in the parlor at Tudor Place. We shouldn't, however, be misled into thinking that Britannia was a radical, or even overtly political. She was typically described as "a distinguished gentlewoman," possessing "charming and sweet dignity" who was "gracious and never failing consideration for others."⁷ Augusta Blanche Berard, who knew the whole family, reported in 1856 that Britannia was a model of feminine virtues: "So kind—so sweet & sympathising."⁸

Britannia's demure virtues were characteristic of the ideal, which assumed a certain level of wealth and privilege. Interestingly, women and girls from this class did enjoy more freedom than their working-class peers. Play—documented in the large number of toys saved throughout the years at Tudor Place-- rather than work or study, seems to have been an important part of all the Peters' childhoods, bearing out historian Barbara E. Moore's assertion that in the early 19th century, "genteel families preferred indulgence over discipline."⁹ As she got older, Britannia's education also set her apart. She entered Georgetown Visitation Coventry, which, like so many female academies of the period, was aimed at better preparing women for the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood. Girls were taught skills like proper etiquette and needlework. As the periodical *Godey's Lady's Book* opined, "There is more to be learned about pouring out tea and coffee than most young ladies are willing to believe."¹⁰ While Britannia was at Visitation, and

⁷ Mary A Mitchell, "An Intimate Journey through Georgetown in April 1863," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, DC* 60/62 (1960/62): 92; "In Memoriam—Brittania Wellington Peter Kennon, March 1911," *Ephemera-- National Society of Colonial Dames, The Historical Society of Washington, DC*.

⁸ "Arlington and Mount Vernon 1856. As Described in a Letter of Augusta Blanche Berard," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 57, no. 2 (April 1949): 156.

⁹ Barbara E. Moore, "American Childhood Through the Years: Colonial Era, 18th Century Through Early 19th Century, and Progressive Era," MA Thesis, Humboldt State University, 2006, 26.

¹⁰ Quoted in Traister, 45.

while her older sisters were at finishing schools in Philadelphia, they engaged in this kind of domestic training, as well as handicrafts such as sewing and decorative painting. On view in Tudor Place's drawing room today is the work desk America painted as a gift for her mother, along with a shell box painted by Columbia. A floral theorem painting—a stencilled design painted on fabric—done by Britannia is a typical example of the type of fancywork that young women of her class were encouraged to pursue. It wasn't intended to be expressive or original, and it certainly wasn't intended to be for sale. The art produced by Britannia and her peers was intended to decorate the home, and mastering this kind of work was seen, on the one hand, as a way to gain the patience and skill needed in domestic management, and, also, as an expression of the woman's decorative role in society.

While Britannia certainly conformed to social norms, there are indications that she had an independent streak. She recalled to Armistead Peter 3rd her love of dancing, despite the disapproval of the local pastor. “The Rev. Mr. Brook, the pastor of Christ Church,” she said, “objected to any one being confirmed in his church who would not give up dancing—so Sister America and I were confirmed in St. John's Church.”¹¹ She also described one of the many balls she attended, noting changing mores: “There was never dancing at the President's house until during Jackson's administration and then only at two to the best of my recollection. He sent out invitations for an entertainment and for the first time he allowed dancing in the East room. Every thing passed off very well.”¹²

It's interesting to note that, while Britannia was clearly a desirable young woman on account of her wealth and social status, she was old by the standards of the day when she married. According to Rebecca Traister, once a woman reached the age of twenty-six, she

¹¹ Britannia's Reminiscences I, Tudor Place Archives, MS 14 Box 69 s24.

¹² *Ibd.*

became a “thornback, a reference to a sea-skate with sharp spines covering its back and tail.”¹³ Britannia was married at the age of twenty-seven. Very little is known about her courtship and marriage. Her husband, Beverly Kennon, from an old Virginia family, was a widower and brought a son with him. The couple lived at the Navy Yard and had one daughter, Markie, who was four months old when her father died during the *USS Princeton* incident. “The dead lay in state in the White House, but nothing could have allayed the suffering of that poor girl, only twenty-nine years old, with a four-month-old child,” wrote her great-grandson years later.¹⁴ Britannia and Markie moved back to Tudor Place with Martha Peter. Britannia’s long widowhood had begun. How had her status changed when she went from being a wife to a widow?

While marriage was considered the most desirable state for any 19th-century woman, legally speaking, it subsumed the identity of the woman into that of her husband. Until the twentieth century, marriage for an American woman meant the total sacrifice of her legal identity and rights. Under marriage laws known as *coverture*, a woman’s legal, social, and economic identity was “covered” by her husband’s. A “feme covert,” or a married woman (a single woman was called a *feme sole*), was subject to what legal historian Ariela Dubler calls “a stunning array of status-defining legal restrictions”¹⁵— she lost the ability to make contracts, buy and sell property, sue or be sued, draft wills, and any property she had previously owned automatically transferred to her husband’s possession. She could not keep her own wages or even travel separately from her husband with freedom. The laws were founded on the idea that, upon marriage, the wife’s self merged with her husband’s to create one combined identity. “A man

¹³ Traister, 41.

¹⁴ Peter, *Tudor Place* 10.

¹⁵ Quoted in Traister, 42.

cannot grant any thing to his wife, or enter into covenant with her: for the grant would suppose her separate existence; and to covenant with her, would be only to covenant with himself,” explained William Blackstone in *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.¹⁶ This is not to say that an unmarried woman would have been completely liberated. It was unusual for a woman to never marry, and those that did not were often forced to take on the role of the matronly spinster. Women without husbands were expected to be pillars of their communities, caring for the sick and elderly in place of a spouse. While other women entered married life, single women were “toiling over those household duties which the gay and thoughtless have forgotten, or are watching by the bed side of pain and death,” the nineteenth-century preacher George Burnap wrote in his *Lectures on the Sphere and Duties of Woman and Other Subjects*.¹⁷ Despite the pity and derision that single women endured, they did have one advantage over their married sisters: the right to own property. Widows, in legal terms, returned to the single state and were no longer subject to coverture. As Rebecca Traister explains, “Almost the only kind of woman who might assert individual power was the wealthy widow, afforded social standing since she’d *been* married and was a legal inheritor of money or property, but left without master.”¹⁸

When Britannia’s mother Martha Peter died in 1854, her will declared: “I give to my daughter Britannia Wellington Kennon... Tudor Place.”¹⁹ Had Beverly Kennon still been alive, this transfer of property from mother to daughter would have been impossible, since coverture laws prohibited married women from owning property independent of their husbands. In fact, Beverly’s will explicitly states that he is bequeathing to his wife a house on H Street that they

¹⁶ Quoted in Marylynn Salmon, “The Legal Status of Women, 1776-1830,” at <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/womens-history/essays/legal-status-women-1776%E2%80%931830>

¹⁷ George Washington Burnap, *Lectures on the Sphere and Duties of Woman, and Other Subjects*, (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1841), 126.

¹⁸ Traister, 40.

¹⁹ Martha Peter will—add full citation.

lived in together, “purchased with money belonging to” her, as well as “all of the property which she inherited from her father, or may inherit from her mother, both real & personal.”²⁰ There are a few interesting things to note about this bequest. First, Beverly was “giving” Britannia property that had been paid for with money that she brought to the marriage. Second, Beverly seems to have been fair-minded and may have even been aware of legal debates around the issue of equity. As Norma Basch has observed, “The concept of equity assumed that the property a wife brought to marriage or inherited afterward, if it were separated from the property of her husband with an appropriate legal instrument, was hers.”²¹ The fact that Britannia and Beverly did not have sons no doubt influenced the terms of his will. It’s interesting to speculate what changes might have taken place—and to the subsequent ownership of Tudor Place—had there been a male heir. As it was, however, Beverly’s will made Britannia Tudor Place’s second female owner.

Britannia’s ownership of Tudor Place became her passion. She seemed to have no interest in remarrying, although the opportunity presented itself more than once. Armistead Peter, 3rd, described jacobina blossoms given to Britannia “by an admirer who... was Secretary of War at the time... I believe Grandmother and he used to ride horseback together, and these plants have been in the greenhouse ever since.”²² Instead of remarrying, Britannia focused her energy on maintaining Tudor Place and supporting the Georgetown community. She continued her parents’ tradition of preservation, storing furniture and other artifacts with an eye to posterity. During the Civil War, she was a strong southern sympathizer, but rented the house to boarders on the Union side in order to prevent the house from being seized and turned into a Union hospital. She later

²⁰ Beverly Kennon will—add full citation.

²¹ Basch, 298.

²² Peter, *Tudor Place*

remembered cancelling plans for a trip to Europe and hurrying back to Georgetown to save the house: “At the end of the month, fearing that the Government might take ‘Tudor’ for a hospital, we decided to return home... After that I took possession of the dear old place again and that Spring concluded to take boarders.”²³

After the war, Britannia became a fixture in Georgetown society. As a woman, she could not hold elected office or take on public service. She did, however, lead numerous women’s organizations and had a strong presence in the church. The positions she held included President of the Serving Society of St. John’s Church, President of the Serving Society of Christ Church, President of the Benevolent Society, President of the Bible Society of Georgetown, directress of the Georgetown orphan asylum, and President of the Aged Woman’s Home in Georgetown, just to name a few. Her involvement suggests a desire to do something more than preside over the parlor. If she had been married, she may have had less time and autonomy for these kinds of pursuits.

Britannia’s status as a widow gave her literal ownership of Tudor Place and thereby the power to shape its future. She passed along her devotion to preserving its history—as well as the property—to the subsequent generations of Peters. The designation of Tudor Place as a National Historic Landmark ensures that Britannia’s legacy remains strong today. Her great-grandson summed this up when he recalled:

Towards the latter years of her life, when she became quite feeble, my father and I used to raise her from this chair and, on either side of her, walk slowly across the upper hall so that she could look down upon the garden from that central window, back to where the telephone table now is. I have never forgotten the expression of love with which she

²³ Britannia’s Reminiscences

looked down on that garden and I am sure it is one of the motivating influences that made me feel that I wanted to do everything I could to put this house and garden back into the condition they deserved.²⁴

²⁴ Peter, *Tudor Place*