

Papers of Martha Washington at Tudor Place, Part III
by Tudor Place Archivist Wendy Kail

“My dear Patcy” - The Tug of War

“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, the historian Jared Sparks (1789-1866) 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. Born in Connecticut in 1789, Jared Sparks was schooled at Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard College. He entered the teaching profession for a short while after graduation, but returned to the university in 1817 as a divinity student. Although eventually ordained as a pastor in the Unitarian Church, in 1823 he resigned his position and purchased the *North American Review*, which he edited from 1824-1831. In 1825 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. 1834-1838 he published twelve volumes of Washington's documents. Many historians acknowledged the purpose and comprehensiveness of this collection, but the fact that Sparks often refined the language of the letters and diaries drew criticism. Undaunted, Sparks defended his work and then produced a two volume abridged version of Washington's life in 1840. He returned to Harvard as a professor of ancient and modern history from 1839-1849 and was appointed president of the college 1849-1853. He died in 1866, leaving journals recording conversations with Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other patriots such as Martha Peter.³

This is the first source which notes the destruction of the personal correspondence of Martha and George Washington. Other confirmation of this event has not surfaced; but 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 take Martha Peter's words as recorded by Sparks for truth until proven otherwise.⁴

Mrs. Peter was Martha Parke Custis, a daughter of Martha Washington's son John Parke Custis and his wife Eleanor Calvert Custis. 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 dated June 23, 1775. Debate about the cause of 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 were 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 had 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 so much time has passed since his visit to Martha Peter that 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 this valuable document may disclose the nature of the personal relationship that existed between George and Martha Washington and foreshadows the struggle they both would endure for the next seven years, literally a tug of war between duty and domicile. For the author of this letter was a military man by training, and he 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 to her, Washington boldly defended his decision to accept the command of the revolutionary forces, and 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 designd (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 upon myself, and given pain

to my friends- This I am sure could not, & ought not to be pleasing to you, & must have lessend (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 preservd (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.

Then he softened the blow of his departure with strong offensive reasoning; he turned 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 wa[s] 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."⁸ 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.⁹ 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.”¹⁰

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 fatagued (sic) –the girls had boath (sic) had (sic) colds since they gott (sic) hear (sic) . . .”¹¹

In a letter of March 2, 1794, 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- . . .”¹² 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 well marred (sic)-“.¹³ Martha Washington wrote her sister the same day: “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, 1795.¹⁴

Martha Custis would have been seventeen years old at the time of this extended stay; she would turn eighteen on December 31, 1794. It was this “elderly sister,” placed in birth order between the bold Eliza Custis and the beautiful Nelly Custis, who had the good fortune to inherit by chance or fate this letter. It was Martha Custis Peter who had the wisdom to protect and preserve for posterity this unique document which sheds a bright if momentary light –and perhaps the only light- on George and Martha Washington’s personal relationship which, according to their wishes, with this one exception escapes record.

¹ Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, Martha Washington (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897), 159-160.

² Herbert Baxter Adams, The Life and Writings of Jared Sparks, Volume 2 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), 47-48.

³ Appletons’, V, 622-623.

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 Fitzpatrick, Will, 57. Fitzpatrick notes that the French desk was bought by Washington for his wife in 1790 from the Comte de Moustier, 64, FN 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.

⁷ Tudor Place Archive, MS 3. George Washington to Martha Washington, Philadelphia, [Pennsylvania], June 18, 1775. Autograph Letter Signed. The letter of June 23, 1775, was returned to Mount Vernon by a relative.

⁸ Washington, George. “Entry, Cash Memorandum Book, 20 June 1775, Series 5, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.

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 Dandridge 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 peiece (sic) 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.

¹⁰ Wharton, 242.

¹¹ Fields, 257-258.

¹² Ibid., 259-260.

¹³ Ibid., 261-262.

¹⁴ Ibid.