



## **Britannia and Armistead: Generations of Stewardship\***

By Mark S. Hudson, Executive Director

Each time I lead a tour of the historic house at Tudor Place, we conclude in the second-floor hallway. Here I share this image of Britannia Peter Kennon and her great-grandson, Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup>. It was taken in 1910 on a garden path below the window where we are standing. The experience is emotional, as we contemplate the intersection of four generations of the Peter family in that simple moment in the final months of Britannia’s life.

Though born over eighty years apart, Britannia and Armistead shared a bond that was expressed in their correspondences and the memories he shared in his 1969 book, *Tudor Place*. It was a bond not only of affection, but of intention—with both committed to preserving Tudor Place for future generations. In his will that bequeathed this National Historic Landmark and its many treasures to the foundation that operates it as a public museum, Armistead expressed his wish that Tudor Place “be considered not as a period museum but as a house lived in and loved by generations of our family.”<sup>1</sup> He surely had his great-grandmother in mind when he wrote this passage.

Britannia Wellington Peter was born at Tudor Place in 1815, the youngest of Martha and Thomas Peter’s children to survive to adulthood. At the time of her birth, Tudor Place was still under construction, to be completed the following year. She lived here most of her life, departing only for the few years she was married to Beverly Kennon and during travels around the start of the Civil War. Commodore Kennon’s tragic death in a Naval accident in 1844 left Britannia a widow with a young child. She found refuge in her grief at Tudor Place and became its owner after her mother’s death in 1854.

Her great-grandson was aware of the hardships she faced, recalling sympathetically, “nothing could have allayed the suffering of that poor girl, only twenty-nine years old, with a four-month old child.”<sup>2</sup> He knew also of the financial difficulties and the unique challenges she faced as a Southern woman in the Union capital during the Civil War. Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup> said the following:



*Armistead Peter 3rd and  
Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon  
Unknown, 1910  
C34*

In light of everything that happened in the meantime—the Civil War, the lack of money, the destruction that comes under those circumstances—I realized that if I ever had the opportunity to do what was necessary and what was desirable for this place, it was my greatest responsibility to do it.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond these difficulties, Britannia’s life was filled with moments of joy and familial pride. Though just a young child at the time, she later recalled with vivid detail Lafayette’s visit to Tudor Place in 1824. “I can see the grand man now as he entered the door of the Parlor; his genial manner and dignified appearance making an impression on my mind which time cannot efface.”<sup>4</sup> Throughout her life, she was honored as a great-grandchild of Martha Washington with memberships in lineage societies, articles about her life at Tudor Place and even being a guest of honor at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. As with most families, the Peters celebrated passages of life including, births, weddings, holidays and birthdays.

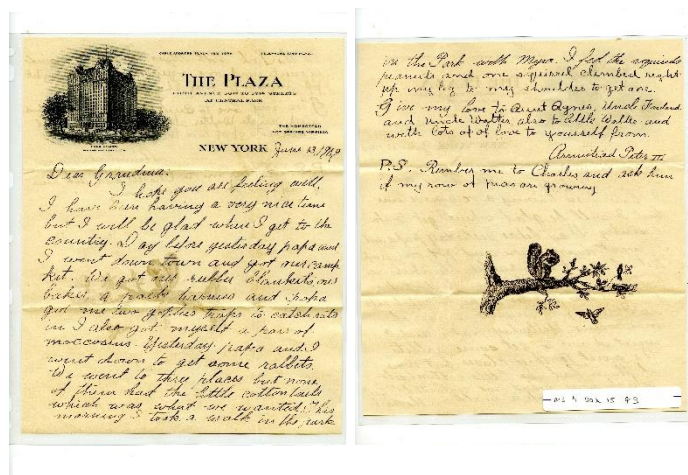
The Tudor Place Archive contains letters from Britannia to Armistead extending birthday wishes. In these letters she called him her “little pet” and comments upon drawing of animals included with his letters. At that time, Armistead was living with his parents in New York, so her letters include invitations to visit his great-grandmother at Tudor Place.<sup>5</sup>

One visit with his great-grandmother stood out in his memories. In his book, *Tudor Place*, Armistead recalls staying the night at Tudor Place a few years before Britannia’s death:

The family felt it would be nice for me to spend the night in this house while she was living here, and I came over and spent the night in the room across the hall in the other bedroom [southwest bedroom], and we spent the evening playing parche[c]si in here...I remember that night very well indeed. It was a very memorable one for me.<sup>6</sup>

In her final months at Tudor Place, Britannia was largely confined to her bedroom and adjacent spaces on the second floor. A window at the end of the second-floor hallway provided a view to the garden below where she and Armistead had posed for the photograph a year before her passing. Armistead understood what these historic landscapes meant to his great-grandmother, inspiring his own stewardship of the site when he could play that role.

A final passage from *Tudor Place* brings us back to the second-floor hallway where my tours conclude. It is here that Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup> remembers he and his father helping Britannia to the window to see the garden:



Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup> to Britannia W. Peter Kennon Letter  
June 13, 1909  
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Towards the latter years of her life, when she became quite feeble, my father and I used to raise her from this chair and, one 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 looked down upon 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.<sup>7</sup>

Britannia lived until the eve of her ninety-sixth birthday, passing away on January 27, 1911 at which point Tudor Place passed on to her grandson, Armistead Peter, Jr. He bequeathed it to his son after his death in 1960. Still inspired by his great-grandmother's affection for Tudor Place, Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup> accepted the responsibility to "do what was necessary and what was desirable for this place." In addition to the care he provided the house and garden during his lifetime, Armistead conveyed an easement to the U.S. Department of the Interior, ensuring Tudor Place's preservation in perpetuity, and created the foundation that preserves the site and shares it with the public today.

\* This article appeared in the *Tudor Place Times* Winter 2023 edition

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<sup>1</sup> Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup>, Last Will & Testament. July 7, 1983. p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup>, *Tudor Place* (Washington, DC: self-published, 1969), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Peter, *Tudor Place*, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> Grant Quertermous, editor, *A Georgetown Life: The Reminiscences of Britannia Peter Kennon of Tudor Place* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), p. 69-70.

<sup>5</sup> Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon to Armistead Peter 3<sup>rd</sup>, Papers of Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon, MS 7, Box 6, Folder 20, Tudor Place Archive.

<sup>6</sup> Peter, *Tudor Place*, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Peter, *Tudor Place*, p. 42.