

MARY BALL: President's mother leaves the farm at last

OTHER GLIMPSSES OF MARY WASHINGTON

"I was often there [at the farm] with George, his playmate, schoolmate, and young man's companion. Of the mother I was ten times more afraid than I ever was of my own parents. She awed me in the midst of her kindness for she was indeed, truly kind. I have often been present with her sons, proper tall fellows too, and we were all as mute as mice; and even now, when time has whitened my locks . . . I could not behold that remarkable woman without feelings it is impossible to describe. Whoever has seen that awe-inspiring air and manner so characteristic in the Father of his Country, will remember the matron."

—A reminiscence of Lawrence Washington, one of George Washington's Chotank cousins

In March 1755, George Washington at the age of 23 received an offer of a place on Gen. Braddock's staff and was on the way to join the general as his aide de camp. This was the beginning of Washington's military career.

He accepted his mother's offer to help at Mount Vernon while he was absent.

"I hope you will spend the chief part of your time at Mount Vernon as you say, where I am certain everything will be order'd as much for your satisfaction as possible, in the Situation we are in . . . Yr. Most Affect. And Dutiful Son"

—Letter from George Washington to his mother

"My dear Brother I am sorry to inform you My Mothers Breast still Continues bad. . . . She is sensible of it & is Perfectly resign'd . . . she wishes to here [sic] from you, she will not believe you are well till she has it from under your Hand . . . Your Relations all Join me in love and Good Wishes to You and Sister Washington, Your Affect. Sister Betty Lewis"

—Letter to George Washington, July 24, 1789

"I do not believe the Genl's mother ever had her likeness taken by any one—and certainly if it ever had been taken, her children and not strangers would have possessed it. The Genl. was her eldest son, Mr. Lewis's mother her only daughter—both favorites and both devoted to her.

"She resembled the Genl. very much. She was always remarkably plain in her dress. [She] died in 89 or 90. I was in mourning for her in New York; had a likeness of her been above ground, it must have been in her children's possession at that time."

—Letter written by Nelly Parke Custis Lewis, widow of Lawrence Lewis, March 16, 1851

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and she would leave it reluctantly in 1772 to move to Fredericksburg, where she would spend the last 17 years of her life.

EPILOGUE

After the death of her husband in 1743, Mary Washington remained at the farm to rear their children. Her principal resource was her 600-acre tract near the Principio Mine, which was mined by tenants. She also retained the 400 acres at Little Falls Run that she had inherited from her father, Joseph Ball.

Her stepson Lawrence inherited the Washington tract at Little Hunting Creek (on which he built Mount Vernon).

Lawrence married into the prominent Fairfax family, which opened the door to his half brother George for opportunities as a surveyor. George also gained experience as a military leader in the Virginia militia while serving in the back country in the contest against the French and Indians.

Contrary to the conjectures of many historians that Mary was at odds with her wealthy stepson, there is evidence that they were on cordial terms. And she surely would have appreciated Lawrence's many kindnesses to her children.

When Lawrence died young (in 1752) and without heirs, George was given the opportunity for a lifetime lease on his brother's estate. His mother helped with its management while he was on military duties in the West. Then in 1759,



PRESERVATION VIRGINIA

Mary Washington spent the last 17 years of her life in this modest cottage at Charles and Lewis streets in Fredericksburg.

soon after his marriage to the wealthy widow Martha Custis, he bought Mount Vernon outright.

By 1758, all of Mary's children had moved on, but she elected to remain at the farm. The first to marry had been her 17-year-old daughter, Betty, who wed her second cousin Fielding Lewis in 1750.

Lewis was developing a suburb on his extensive lands on the west side of Fredericksburg. There were children in the Lewis household, not only Betty's own grandchildren but also those of Fielding's deceased first wife, another Washington cousin. (Mary had served as godmother.)

The new town lots sold well. George Washington purchased two on Charles Street intended for his

mother. But she remained on the farm—the village of Falmouth with its prosperous Scottish merchants supplied her wants.

With visits to his mother at the farm—and with Fielding and Betty Lewis relieving him of duties he would otherwise have faced as head of the family—George Washington enjoyed Fredericksburg's lively town life with kinsmen, veterans and merchants as he passed through en route to Williamsburg as an elected burgess representing Frederick County.

Mary Washington's health, however, was evidently beginning to decline. George took the matter up with his brother-in-law as they traveled together to Williamsburg.

Lewis' new suburb offered the perfect time and place to bring Mary across from the farm.

Washington advanced Lewis money for the purchase of the two lots on Charles Street, and Lewis agreed to construct a cottage. But they reckoned without "the old lady," as she was now referred to in family circles. She declined to leave the farm, where she remained for another decade.

In December 1771, she evidently endured a lengthy illness under the care of the Lewises and Dr. Hugh Mercer, while the cottage in town was being prepared for her occupancy—the very one she had refused a decade earlier.

There she spent the

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