

**“A Mason’s Martha”**  
Martha Dandridge Custis Washington  
by Steven Campbell

Part I

“The Girl” In eastern Virginia the Pamunkey River flows through rural New Kent County. Martha, the eldest child of Militia Col. Jack and wife Fanny Dandridge, was born June 2, 1731, on their 500 acre tobacco plantation, Chestnut Grove. Whilst not extremely wealthy, the 4<sup>th</sup> generation English settlers were very successful landowners. Little Patcy (as Martha was called) is described as being tiny, fair complected, with brown hair and hazel eyes. With no towns nearby, rural life in 18<sup>th</sup> century America was quite demanding, even for the well to do family into which Martha was born. The 15 - 20 slaves owned by the family were mainly used in the fields and young Martha was taught how to sew clothing, sheets and towels, as well as other household chores. She is described as being good humored. Her mother “home schooled” her, teaching her to read and write, as well as how to conduct herself as a proper young lady should. Along with practical lessons such as riding and farm life, she was taught to be well mannered, how to properly entertain guests, dance and sing. At an early age, Martha read novels, poetry and the Bible. She was also exceptionally good at math, which would greatly benefit her in dealing with future financial matters. She and her parents attended nearby rural St. Peters Church (which still stands today). The family attended local BBQs and other nearby upper class social events. At the age of 17, the petite, 5 foot tall young lady was deemed eligible for courting.

“The Young Bride, Mother & Widow” In that her family was not super rich, the attractive young lady would not come with a large dowery, which was a detractor to “upper crust” bachelors. There was one neighbor, however, who was managing one of his wealthy father’s plantations, who took a strong interest in the graceful young woman. Daniel Parke Custis, at 37, was the son of one of the richest, unhappiest and dominating men in Virginia - Col. John Custis IV, who when he learned of his son’s interest in Martha stated “...she was not good enough or rich enough to marry my son”. The father’s threat to disinherit Daniel cooled the courtship, yet the charming young Martha “won over” her future father-in-law and in May 1750 at age 19, she and 39-year-old Daniel were married at her parents’ estate. What we know as a honeymoon today was not common in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Travel was slow, dirty, demanding and there were no resort hotels, and most taverns were not conducive to newlyweds. Hence, the honeymoon period was normally spent at the couple’s home, which in this case was Daniel’s nearby plantation, White House. Shortly following the wedding Col. Custis died, leaving his son three plantations (White House, Romancoke, and Queen’s Creek) encompassing 1,800 acres, 300 slaves, several houses in Jamestown and Williamsburg, along with a great deal of cash and investments. Daniel and Martha Custis were exceedingly wealthy! Martha now had a household staff of twelve servants, which she ran with great efficiency. The Custises entertained guests of their class. Soon Martha was with child and in 1751 the first of four children were born. Unfortunately, the child mortality rate was very high in Colonial America. Their first born son died at the age of 3 and his sister, Frances, died when she was 4. Martha would develop into a very protective mother with her two remaining children, Jack and Patcy. When Martha was 25 (1756) her father died. In less than a year (July 1757) Martha’s 45 year old husband became seriously ill, perhaps with scarlet fever or a staph infection. Though treated by doctors from Williamsburg, Martha’s

husband of 7 years died. Now at age 26 she became the richest woman in the Colony of Virginia. Widowed and with two small children, Martha's common and business sense would serve her well as suitors began to "line up" to contend for the young widow's hand.

"Mrs. Washington" Eight months after her husband's death, two "frontrunners" began courting Mrs. Custis. Charles Carter was a wealthy merchant, as well as a political leader in Virginia. At 50, he was 23 years older than Martha and recently widowed with 12 children! The second contender was a bachelor eight months younger than Martha. Though not exceedingly wealthy, he was well situated with respectable land ownership, tall, athletic, good looking, an excellent dancer and a "rising star" in Colonial military circles. George Washington had barely survived the French & Indian War. Becoming seriously ill with dysentery, in 1758 the young Colonel rode from Mt. Vernon to Dr. John Amson's office in Williamsburg for treatment. Successfully cured, he detoured to White House plantation to "pay his respects" to the widow Custis. Though successful in other aspects of life, the young Colonel had floundered in two earlier courtships (Betsy Fautleroy and Polly Phillipse). Greeting him at White House was the 26 year old Martha: slim, petite, charming, though her normal radiant smile was somewhat dimmed in that she was grieving the death of her 17 year old sister Nancy. Martha found George pleasant, trusting, good looking and kind to her and her two children. Evidently their first meeting went well, for he returned to White House just a week later. Leaving to return to his Virginia Regiment in Winchester, George stopped at Mt. Vernon to order the construction of a second floor and on May 5, 1758, he ordered Martha a wedding ring from a jeweler in Philadelphia. On June 5, 1758, George returned to White House and proposed to Martha. She accepted.

Along with proposing marriage, fulfilling his military duty, and adding onto Mt. Vernon, the young Colonel was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses.

On Saturday, January 6, 1759, Martha Dandridge Custis and George Washington were married in the parlor at White House. The bride wore a deep yellow colored dress with her size 4 handmade shoes, and the groom a new tailored suit rather than his customary uniform. Their union resulted in collected wealth of at least two million dollars, 300 slaves, 6 plantations, and land grants encompassing 22,000 acres. The cold, snowy winter kept them at White House until March when Mr. Washington reported to the capital in Williamsburg, accompanied by his new wife and two stepchildren. They lived in one of Martha's town properties until departing for Mt. Vernon. George called Martha Patcy and she called him her "old man".

Arriving at her new home, Martha found Mt. Vernon under construction, yet with her practical and business skills she was up to the task of setting up housekeeping in the former bachelor's quarters. (Note: the Mt. Vernon Martha arrived at is not the house we see today. That final stage was not completed until 1787.)

George's military life was concluded and he was in his element as a farmer, investor, husband, land speculator and Colony Representative under the British Crown. Known for being somewhat difficult and self-centered, George's mother, Mary Ball Washington, did not meet her new daughter-in-law for nearly a year, when George and Martha visited her in Fredericksburg. When George and Martha did visit his mother, they lodged at his sister Betsy's home, Kenmore. Mary never visited them at Mt. Vernon.

A typical day with the Washington's at Mt. Vernon: Both Martha and her "old man" rose before

dawn. They would have a light breakfast. George would “saddle up” to begin his inspection of 3 farms, (2 attached to Mt. Vernon) while Martha dedicated an hour to devotion. She then saw to household needs, guest requirements, tutoring young Patcy and Jack, plus sewing, needlework and knitting. The main meal of the day was dinner, which was served at 3 pm. Visitors normally arrived in the afternoon. Martha enjoyed singing, conversation and reading. A light supper was served in the evening and normally everyone retired by 9 pm. The Washingtons regularly attended either Truro Parish or Christ Church in nearby Alexandria on Sundays. George wrote: “I am now I believe fixed at this seat with an agreeable consort for life and hope to find more happiness in retirement than I ever experienced amidst a wide and bustling world.”

Though generally graced with good health, the family sustained many of the same illnesses we do today: measles, fevers, colds, flu, sprains, stomach disorders, along with aches and pains. Martha used herbal and chemical remedies. One common childhood discomfort was pinworms (a bacterial infection). Her family remedy was:

“1 oz. seeds of wormseed / ½ an oz. Rhubarb / 1 tablespoon small cloves of garlic. Put the ingredients into a pint bottle. Fill it with best wine or whiskey, let it stand a few days, shaking it well, then strain it. For a child 5 years a small teaspoonful, less for younger children.” (a laxative)

Unfortunately, Martha’s surviving daughter, Patcy, was afflicted with incurable epilepsy. Both she and her brother Jack were doted upon, spoiled, protected and lavished with gifts, toys, clothes and musical instruments. A tutor was brought to Mt. Vernon for the two children’s education. While Patcy proved an apt student, Jack preferred to daydream, play, hunt, shoot, ride and fish. George was appointed the legal guardian of his two stepchildren and as he grew closer and closer to Patcy, Jack’s unwillingness to apply himself to nearly anything but his likes caused George great concern. George and Martha did not have any children together, possibly as a result of his contraction of smallpox or as a result of a physical injury due to her having given birth to four children in her first marriage.

Life was not all work and no play. George and Martha along with their good friends from nearby Belvoir, Will and Sally Fairfax, traveled to Warm Springs, Va (now Berkeley Springs, WV) where they dined, lodged, played cards, read, rode, relaxed and “drank the waters” for health purposes. Martha wore a typical ladies bathing dress (one is on display at Mt. Vernon). It was loose, light, ankle long, tie at neck, ¾ length sleeve with small lead weights sewn into the hem to keep it in place when one is in the waters.

In June 1773, tragedy would visit Mt. Vernon. For five years the Washingtons sought the best known medical treatment for Patcy, yet on Sat., June 19, Washington wrote that the lovely young girl experienced one of her fits and “within 2 minutes she was gone”. In writing to his brother Jack of Martha’s condition, George wrote that Martha was “reduced to the lowest ebb of misery”. Now, three of her four children were dead. Soon after, their best friends Will and Sally Fairfax would sail for England, never to return. Meanwhile, George had been able to gain enrollment in King’s College (now Columbia University) for Jack. Unwilling to apply himself, he withdrew from school and began a successful courtship with Nelly Calvert of the wealthy Maryland family. Martha was happy for her son and when marriage loomed in 1774 for the teenagers, Washington wrote, “I shall say nothing further therefore on the subject”.

## Part II

“The Sacrifices of War and A New Nation” In 1774 the rift between the American colonies and England was widened. Washington, along with Patrick Henry and Edmund Pendleton, were selected to represent Virginia at the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia. On August 31, 1774, they departed Mt. Vernon with Martha stating, “I hope you will stand firm, I know George will. God be with you gentlemen.” Returning home from the First Congress, Washington was summoned to serve again, and it was at this time, June 1775, that he was chosen to serve as Commander-in-Chief of the American forces rebelling against the British Crown. Normally writing Martha daily, he waited three days to write her that his obligation of duty and honor outweighed his desire to stay home. They had a partnership and he trusted her judgement in the running of the estate and welfare of the family. Upon accepting his new command, George wrote a new will and asked for her input (something not needed or common in the 18<sup>th</sup> century). He wrote to her seven times in seven days inquiring about her safety and happiness. For the first time in 1775 she would journey northward to join the General as she would five times during the War for American Independence. Her first trip out of Virginia found her in America’s largest city, Philadelphia. While she was en route to Headquarters in Massachusetts, she was taken back by the “big city” and its politics. Finding Headquarters serving as living quarters and offices, she soon established a degree of order and domestic tranquility as she would at Valley Forge, Morristown, and New York camps. Being in their mid-forties they were surrounded by younger officers and their wives. Martha befriended Lucy Knox (Henry’s wife) as well as Kitty Green (Nathanael’s wife). Though surrounded by “doom and gloom”, setback after setback, depleted supplies and troops, she wrote: “I am still determined to be cheerful and to be happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learnt from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances; we carry the seeds of the one, or the other about with us, in our minds wherever we go.” Martha Washington saw the cruelty of war and, though the General’s lady, she was attuned to the hardships. Maintaining a semblance of normalcy at Headquarters for her husband was important to her. Gen. Nathanael Greene wrote: “His worthy lady seems to be in perfect felicity while she is by the side of her old man as she calls him”. The Generals’ wives sewed, tended to the wounded, darned shirts and socks. During the Revolutionary War, disease claimed more lives than British bullets. Smallpox was a critical problem. As an example to the Army, Martha allowed a doctor to infect her with the virus (as was the practice) to vaccinate her. She was quarantined for three weeks and the successful inoculation bore no scars or other effects. The Continental Army surgeon James Thatcher wrote, “Mrs. Washington combines in an uncommon degree great dignity of manner with the most pleasing affability”. As time allowed she returned home to Mt. Vernon to check on the status of their home and well being of their family, which had added grandchildren as a result of her son Jack’s marriage to Nelly Calvert. When in camp at Valley Forge, Mrs. Washington’s sense of humor was revealed when she named a camp tomcat Hamilton after her husband’s staff officer Alexander Hamilton, who was a favorite of several young ladies. In May 1780 while headquartered with the General in Morristown, Martha suffered a gall bladder attack and was bedridden for five weeks. Upon returning to Mt. Vernon she was greeted by her fourth grandchild. September 1781 found the General marching south with the American Army and for the first time in six years he returned home for a three night stay while en route to Yorktown. Martha’s last remaining child, 26 year old Jack, asked to accompany his stepfather as an observer. He consented and Jack witnessed Lord Cornwallis’ surrender. Sadly, Jack contracted

“camp fever” (typhus). He was taken to his uncle’s nearby plantation, Eltham, in New Kent County, where fortunately Martha and his wife Nelly arrived to see him just before he died. Now, all of Martha’s children had departed this world and her misery was devastating. She only found comfort in her husband, family, friends and devotions.

Though most people think that the Revolution ended at Yorktown in 1781, it actually did not result in our independence until October 1783. Martha joined the General at his headquarters along the Hudson River in New York. Once again Martha was struck with an undisclosed illness and upon her recovery she left headquarters for the last time, returning to Mt. Vernon to await the General’s arrival. Reporting to Congress in Annapolis (Md), George Washington resigned his commission in December 1783 and arrived home on Christmas Eve. Duty had called him away 8½ years and Martha had been with him five of those years. Her late son’s widow, Nelly, remarried and legal custody of two of her children, Nelly and Washy, was awarded George and Martha (not an uncommon practice in 18<sup>th</sup> century families). In 1785 Martha’s last brother, Bartholomew, drowned and nine days later her 75 year old mother died. George’s brother Samuel (married 5 times) died and George assisted in raising three of his children. Then in 1787 George’s favorite brother Jack died. Family and guests filled Mt. Vernon, and though no longer the Commander-in-Chief and Lady Washington, they were not out of the spotlight.

“The 1st First Lady” The year 1787 witnessed the birth of the United States Constitution. George was summoned to serve his country once again and to preside over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Leaving home in May, he would venture forth without Martha by his side. He wrote “Mrs. Washington is become too domestick, and too attentive to two little Grand children to leave home”. Fall 1787 found him home once again and Martha wrote that she hoped they would “grow old in solitude and tranquility together”. It was not to be, for on April 14, 1789, George Washington was informed that he had been elected the first President of the United States. Though land rich, the new President had to borrow 600 pounds for travel and business expenses.

About five weeks later Martha arrived at the Capital, New York City. Within three weeks of her arrival the President was diagnosed with anthrax, appearing as a large mass on his left thigh. Surgeons, without anesthesia, performed a painful surgery. Many thought his condition was critical. Fortunately, the first President would recover in six weeks. During his recovery Vice President Adams’ wife, Abigail, visited and she wrote Mrs. Washington was “easy and polite, plain in her dress - her hair is white, beautiful teeth, rather short... her manners modest, unassuming, dignified and feminine. Mrs. Washington is one of those unassuming characters which create love and esteem”. These two ladies would be life-long friends.

Service as the first President brought political and military challenges for Washington. Service as the nation’s First Lady was untrodden ground. If she were too formal, critics claimed she was assuming a royal manner, if too carefree she was not serious enough. Martha was a gifted balance. She entertained the dignitaries, conversed intelligently and maintained her dignity with the wives and families. The President’s home was also the government’s place of business. Quality family time was limited due to the affairs of state. Each Thursday at 4 pm the President and Martha hosted a formal dinner. Washington never delayed the start of dinner for a tardy guest, no matter who they were. The typical fare was a two course meal: (1) consisting of soup, fish, fowl, meat, vegetables; (2) apple pies, puddings, iced creams, jelly, melons, apples, peaches,

nuts. Beverages served were normally beer, cider and wine with the dinner concluding with toasts of the President's favorite Madeira. When duties of State arose the ladies would retire upstairs for conversation and coffee. Tutors provided education for their grandchildren. Martha's friends Betsy Hamilton and Lucy Knox visited often. Weekends provided escapes from the city with carriage rides and picnics in the countryside. The First Family attended St. Paul's and then the rebuilt Trinity Church.

Sunday afternoons were left for reading, sewing, talking and letter writing. In September 1789 Washington's mother died in Fredericksburg. Their relationship had been "frosty" yet his writing showed that he did honor and respect her. On the first Presidential Tour (to the northern states) Martha remained in New York City (as she would on George's tour of the southern states). She became somewhat lonely and depressed by his absence. She wrote, "I never go to the public places - indeed I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else, there is certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from". She being 58 and the President 57 they were considered elderly by 18<sup>th</sup> century standards. Both of their hair was white and their eyesight and hearing diminished. Martha wore spectacles to read as did George. As a result of a political compromise between Jefferson, Hamilton and Madison, the Capital of the new republic would be relocated from New York City to Philadelphia and then in ten years to a southern location along the Potomac selected by the President. Before the move to Philadelphia the President developed pneumonia in May of 1790. Doctors and friends thought him to be dying. Martha was extremely upset. His recovery delighted her and once he was back to his duties she returned home to Mt. Vernon. The government moved to Philadelphia in November 1790 and the Washingtons lived in the Morris House on High Street. Upon Martha's return, domestic tranquility returned and they chose to attend St. Peter's Church. At the conclusion of his first term both George and Martha had hoped to return to private life. They knew they were getting older and slowing down. Unfortunately the frail and fledgling government's future was in question and after lengthy lobbying, George agreed to run for a second term. Martha was opposed to it and begged him to decline. She feared for his survival with two "close calls" of near fatal illnesses during his first term. Reelected, he began his second term in 1793. The second term proved to be more grueling: political and personal sniping, near war with France, bickering and quarreling between his own Cabinet and Congress consumed his time. In 1793 a yellow fever outbreak occurred in Philadelphia. The government literally shut down with elected officials and citizens fleeing. From August through October George and Martha remained at Mt. Vernon. The pandemic resulted in the death of 12% of the capital (5,000 souls). Returning to Philadelphia, the First Lady's lifestyle loosened a bit and she enjoyed the theater and shopping along her usual pursuits of reading newspapers and novels, sewing, conversation and visits from family and friends. Her fondness for candy and desserts grew, as did her bouts with stomach disorders, colds and the normal aches and pains of aging. In 1794 she became a great grandmother. The President was called to take the field to foil the short termed Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania. In 1797 they both agreed that there would be no third term for George. In her last winter as First Lady, Martha wrote, "The winter has been very severe here - but is now moderating and drawing to a close, with which the curtain will fall on our public life, and place us in a more tranquil theatre". Just after John Adams' oath of office ceremony the Washingtons returned home.

At age 65, Martha enlisted a local and efficient housekeeper to manage the house and its' staff. She visited friends in nearby Alexandria but rarely ventured far from Mt. Vernon where she and

George were surrounded by family, the laughter of grandchildren, as well as the constant influx of visitors. It was a rare occasion when George and Martha dined alone. One French guest wrote of her, "she retains strong remains of considerable beauty. Mrs. Washington is a very agreeable, lively, sensible person". When war nearly erupted with France, President Adams commissioned Washington to mobilize the American Army. Luckily "cooler heads" prevailed and war was averted. In 1797 George's sister Betsy died as did his brother Charles (for whom Charlestown, W. Va. is named) in 1798. Martha's last sister Betty died. Yet, returning home to their private lives, they were afforded a period of tranquility.

"A Widow Once Again" The winter of 1799 was a bitter one. As was his daily routine, George rode throughout the property inspecting projects and crop layouts for the coming spring. On Thursday, Dec. 12, he was caught in a snow, sleet and rain storm. On Friday evening, Dec. 13, after reading the paper aloud to Martha, as was a custom, he retired for the night. During the night he experienced throat congestion and developed difficulty in breathing. Martha wanted to get up, yet he did not want her to do so, fearing that she would catch cold. At dawn she sent for three doctors from Alexandria. Unfortunately the manner in which they treated his throat inflammation (Quinsy) contributed to his decline (by means of bleeding, blistering and purging). The youngest doctor recommended a tracheotomy, however it was deemed a too new and radical procedure. The entire day of Saturday, Dec. 14 found Martha sitting at her "old man's" bedside, leaving only once to obtain his will as he requested. At 10 pm on Sat., Dec. 14, 1799, Martha Dandridge Custis Washington became a widow once again. She asked the doctor, "Is he gone?" Yes, she was told, then "Tis well - All is now over. I shall soon follow him... I have no more trials to pass through." Martha immediately moved to a small third floor bedroom and forever closed the bedroom that she and George had shared for 40 years. Per his request, George's funeral was held on Dec. 18<sup>th</sup>. Overwrought with grief and deterred by the frigid cold and countless guests Martha did not accompany George's body to the family vault to where it was carried by local Freemasons. The nation was stunned at his death! Ceremonial re-enactments of his funeral were held throughout the nation. Martha was flooded with letters of condolence and people seeking mementos. The volume of mail grew so great that Congress granted her a lifetime "privilege of franking" letters and parcels.

Surrounded by family, friends and the never ending stream of visitors, Martha maintained the dignity she always had. Congress requested to have George's body moved to the new Capital. She finally agreed, yet true to its form, Congress could not agree how to do such - they never did.

In 1801 Martha rewrote her will in which she immediately freed 123 slaves at Mt. Vernon, with the remaining servants to be freed after her death. On May 1, 1802, she fell ill with a feverous stomach ailment. She sent for her husband's long time friend, Dr. James Craik (a Freemason from Alexandria) to attend her. After three weeks of illness, Martha Washington died on Saturday, May 22, 1802, just shy of her 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. She laid in state in the parlor just as her "old man" had, and on May 25, 1802, after a private, low-key Episcopal service, she was laid to rest beside her husband in the family vault. She had been a widow for 2½ years. Just prior to her death, Martha had all of her private letters from George to her (that were in her possession)

burned. Only three are known to have survived and they each begin to my “dearly beloved wife”.

George Washington loved and valued his wife and he was always concerned about her happiness, safety and comfort. She was the anchor that provided that stability that he needed and they were partners who helped shape our history.