

To The Washington Ladies

Our Society's meeting in Fredericksburg this year (2002) makes us think of the Washingtons who lived in Fredericksburg, and the first who spring to mind are two women, Mary the mother, and Betty the sister of George Washington.

Mary Ball and Augustine Washington settled at Ferry Farm on the outskirts of Fredericksburg in 1738. Augustine died there in 1743, and Mary continued to live at Ferry Farm until 1772, when she moved into town and lived in the house still preserved as the "Mary Washington house." She is buried near Kenmore, where a beautiful obelisk marks the spot.

So it was that Betty Washington, Mary Ball Washington's daughter, lived at Ferry Farm from early childhood until she married Fielding Lewis, the young widower of her cousin Catherine Washington. Fielding and Betty built the magnificent house later named Kenmore, which is the star historic attraction of Fredericksburg. On George Washington's frequent trips between Mt. Vernon and Williamsburg, he invariably stopped in Fredericksburg to visit his mother and sister. The descendants of these ladies now number several thousands, including many members of the Society.

The Washington women are of two varieties -- wives and daughters. Washington wives start life with another name, and become Washington women when they marry. Washington daughters start life with the name, perhaps lose it by marrying, but always think of themselves as Washington women. It is a general rule that every Washington descendant today either is born with the surname Washington, or descends from a daughter who is his nearest Washington ancestor.

General rules have exceptions. Consider how to classify Catherine Washington (1740-1792), a daughter of John Washington of Chotank. Her father was John Washington, her brother was John Washington (although he died in childhood), her husband was John Washington of Hylton, and not only was a son named John Washington, but another son had the glorious name of Washington John Washington.

There are about thirty Miss Washingtons, like Betty Washington Lewis and Catherine Washington Washington, in the eighteenth-century family, who have left descendants, in most cases very numerous. The earliest Miss Washington we have in Virginia, however, was the seventeenth-century one, Anne Washington (ca1661-ante1698), daughter of the elder immigrant brother, Col. John Washington. Anne married Francis Wright of Westmoreland County. Although she had only one surviving child and apparently only two grandchildren, her later descendants flourished and seem to have become by far the most numerous branch of the Washington family. Virtually nothing can ever be known of her life, except to the extent one can deduce from what is known in general about life in Virginia in those early days, but it is clear that many of her descendants will always remember her as their link to the Washingtons.

In the next generation comes the first Washington woman to live in Fredericksburg, that

well-known lady, George Washington's aunt and godmother, Mildred Washington. She was wife and widow of John Lewis, then of Roger Gregory, and finally of Henry Willis, whom William Byrd called the "top man of the place." It is said she was found weeping immoderately when in 1733 the news came that Henry Willis's second wife, a cousin of Mildred's, had died. Asked if she really had been that fond of her cousin, she answered that her tears only meant that old Henry Willis would now be down to see her, and she did not know what to do with him. Six weeks later they were married. She has many descendants, not only from her son Lewis Willis, but also from her Gregory daughters who married Thornton brothers of Fall Hill, on the edge of Fredericksburg. Clayton Torrence did an excellent article about her in the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography some fifty years ago, called "A Virginia Lady of Quality and Her Possessions," based on the articles listed in the inventory of her estate. It is well worth looking up.

The only other Miss Washington to leave a family in that generation is, by contrast, hardly known at all. She was Mary Washington of the Chotank part of the family, who married Burdett Ashton about 1732. She left three children, from whom some of the Ashtons, and many of the Wray connection in the Hampton area descend. Few, if any, of them know they have a Washington ancestor.

In the next generation, there were half a dozen Washington daughters who left families. Besides Catherine and Betty, the two wives of Fielding Lewis, and Catherine Washington (Washington), there were three of this last Catherine's sisters, Mildred Washington (Dade, Williamson), Frances Washington (Stuart), and Elizabeth Washington (Berry), who have interesting and well-traced progenies. When it comes to the next generation, toward the end of the eighteenth century, many new names come into the Washington family by the marriage of Washington brides. There were Husbands named Throckmorton, Whiting, Nelson, Perrin, Spotswood, Ashton, Thornton, Parks, Ball, Buckner, Hungerford, Newby, Storke, Peyton, Stith, and Balmaine, and there were a couple of Washington-Washington cousin marriages, where the bride did not change her name. The proliferation of names in the nineteenth century, of course, was tremendous.

In looking back to your ancestors, do not remember just the men in your Washington line, but also particularly recall your nearest Washington ancestor, who was a Miss Washington -- unless your father was named Washington!

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