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**Washington's Advice**  
On Love & Marriage

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## INTRODUCTION

History classes have provided Americans some familiarity with Washington the Revolutionary War General and Washington the first president of the United States, but most people have little knowledge about the more personal aspects of his life. Washington was a loving husband, a doting father and grandfather to his wife's children and grandchildren, and a patriarchal benefactor to nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends. As the head of a large, extended family Washington often gave advice and direction, both solicited and unsolicited, upon a variety of topics. Perhaps surprisingly one of these subjects was love and marriage.

In a number of letters to members of his family, Washington cautioned the young adults to make "prudent" choices in marriage. He suggested that before Eleanor Calvert Custis, the widow of Martha's son Jack, remarry, she should consider:

"the family & connexions of the man...the line of conduct he has observed...what prospect there is of his proving kind & affectionate to you...and, how far his connexions will be agreeable to you..."

Similar words were given to Martha's granddaughter Elizabeth, when Washington wrote:

"Love is a mighty pretty thing; but like all other delicious things, it is cloying; and when the first transports of the passion begins to subside, which it assuredly will do, and yield--oftentimes too late--to more sober reflections, it serves to evince, that love is too dainty a food to live upon alone...."

While Washington apparently did not hesitate to give cautionary advice to the younger generation on affairs of the heart, he stopped short of interference with anyone's choice of a spouse. "It has ever been a maxim with me, through life, neither to promote, nor to prevent a matrimonial connection, unless there should be something, indispensably requiring interference in the latter."

There has been much speculation by historians about his marriage to the widow Martha Dandridge Custis, but about its success Washington had no doubt as his remarks to Charles Armand-Tuffin on 10 August 1786 indicate: "For in my estimation more permanent & genuine happiness is to be found in the sequestered walks of connubial life, than in the giddy rounds of promiscuous pleasure, or the more tumultuous and imposing scenes of successful ambition." (Confederation Series, 4:203-4)

George and Martha were married for nearly forty years before Washington's death in December 1799. Unfortunately for later historians, Martha, before

her death in 1802, destroyed nearly all the correspondence with her husband in an attempt to preserve the privacy of their relationship. But Washington's thoughts on love and marriage in general can be found in the letters he wrote to his grandchildren and other various family members and friends. His words, written over two centuries ago, give a glimpse into the mind of Washington on a subject far removed from war and politics.

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## Letters

### **Washington to Burwell Bassett**

**23 May 1785**

Washington was noncommittal when his nephew George Augustine Washington, eldest son of his brother Charles, decided to marry Frances ("Fanny") Bassett, daughter of Martha Washington's sister Anna Maria Dandridge and her husband Burwell Bassett. Washington explained his philosophy to the father of the bride in a letter dated 23 May 1785, a photocopy of which is in the Washington Papers at the Library of Congress: I have understood that his [George Augustine's] addresses to Fanny were made with your consent--I now learn that he is desirous, and she is willing, to fulfil the engagement they have entered into; and that they are applying to you for permission to do so.

It has ever been a maxim with me, through life, neither to promote, nor to prevent a matrimonial connection, unless there should be something, indispensably requiring interference in the latter. I have always considered Marriage as the most interesting event of ones life. The foundation of happiness or misery. To be instrumental therefore in bringing two people together who are indifferent to each other, & may soon become objects of disgust, or to prevent a union which is prompted by the affections of the mind, is what I never could reconcile with reason, & therefore neither directly, nor indirectly have I ever said a syllable to Fanny, or George, upon

the Subject of their intended connection: but as their attachment to each other seems of early growth, warm, & lasting, it bids fair for happiness. If therefore you have no objec[tion,] I think, the sooner it is consummated the better.

I have just now informed them both (the former through Mrs Washington) that it is my wish they should live at Mount Vernon.

The amorous couple, who were already living at Mount Vernon at the time of their engagement, were married there on 15 October 1785. (Diaries, vol. 4, p. 206). Later in December of that same year George Augustine Washington became the manager of Mt. Vernon, a position he held until shortly before his death on 5 February 1793.

### **Martha Washington to Fanny Bassett Washington 29 August 1794**

After the death of her husband George Augustine Washington, a nephew of George Washington, in 1793, Fanny Bassett subsequently married George Washington's secretary and close friend Tobias Lear. Before she accepted Lear's proposal, Fanny sought the advice of George and Martha Washington. Although Fanny's letter of 29 August 1794 has not been found, Martha's answer written that same day echoes the sentiments expressed by her husband in his letter to Burwell Bassett in 1785:

My dear Fanny, I wish I could give you unerring advise in regard to the request contained in your last letter; I really dont know what to say to you on the subject; you must be governed by your own judgement, and I trust providence will direct you for the best; it is a matter more interesting to yourself than any other[.] The person contemplated is a worthy man, esteemed by every one that is acquainted with him; he has, it is concieved, fair prospects before him;--is, I belive, very industri[ous] and will, I have not a doubt, make sumthing handsome for himself.--as to the President, he never has, nor never will, as you have often heard him say, inter meddle in matrimonial concerns. he joins with me however in wishing you every happyness this world can give.--you have had a long acquaintance with Mr Lear, and must know him as well as I do.--he always appeared very attentive to his wife and child, as farr as ever I have seen; he is I believe, a man of strict honor and probity; and one with whom you would have as good a prospect of happyness as with any one I know; but beg you will not let anything I say influence you either way. The President has a very high opinion of and friendship for Mr. Lear; and has not the least objection to your forming the connection but, no more than myself, would wish to influence your judgement, either way--yours and the childrens good being among the first wishes of my heart.

Fanny's marriage to Lear was short-lived, for Fanny died in March 1796, probably from tuberculosis, the same disease which had claimed her first husband three years earlier. This letter is printed in "Worthy Partner": The

Papers of Martha Washington, edited by Joseph E. Fields, Westport, CT, 1994: 276-77.

## **Washington to Nelly Custis**

**21 March 1796**

Nelly Custis, granddaughter of Martha Washington

From G.W.P. Custis's Recollections

The following letter, which will appear in a future volume of the Presidential Series, was first published in George Washington Parke Custis's Recollections of Washington (Philadelphia, 1861), pp. 41-44. It was reprinted in John C. Fitzpatrick's Writings of Washington, vol. 34, pp. 91-93. Both sources date the letter as 16 January 1795, but this date is incorrect. Only fragments of the original manuscript, deposited in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, Great Britain, have been identified. Although the original letterhead no longer exists, the content of the printed letter clearly indicates that Custis made an error in transcribing the date and that Fitzpatrick replicated this mistake in his later publication. A twentieth-century, typed transcript, apparently made by a private owner of the manuscript before it became fragmented, exists in the library of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. Dated 21 March 1796, the transcript matches the extant fragments in Oxford, and together they both suggest that Custis silently emended his grandfather's capitalization, spelling, and punctuation, and eliminated parts of his grandfather's letter, especially those that did not pertain to the subject of love and marriage. Custis did this despite his claim to "give it entire, precisely as it was written in the original, now before us." The mention of the marriage of Nelly's eldest sister Betsey, near the end of the letter, clearly places the letter in early 1796, for on Saturday 6 February 1796 George Washington had received a letter from Betsey announcing her engagement (this letter of 1 February has not been found). Another letter, written by Washington to Betsey's fiancé Thomas Law ([link to letter](#)) and owned by the Morgan Library in New York, also suggests that Custis's date of 1795 was an error.

The letter printed below is taken from the typed transcript with the major differences from the Custis version indicated by bold type. Variations between the typed transcript and the Oxford fragments can be noted by examining the images of the fragments.

Philadelphia, 21st Mar. 1796

My dear Nelly,

In one respect, I have complied fully with my promise to you, in another I have deviated from it in a small degree. I have given you letter for letter, but not with the promptitude I intended; your last of the 29th ult. having lain by me several days unacknowledged. This, however might reasonably have been expected from the multiplicity of my business.

Your letter, the receipt of which I am now acknowledging, is written correctly, and in fair characters; which is an evidence that you command,

when you please, a fair hand. Possessed of these advantages, it will be your own fault if you do not avail yourself of them: and attention being paid to the choice of your subjects, you can have nothing to fear from the malignancy of criticism, as your ideas are lively, and your descriptions agreeable. Your sentences are pretty well pointed; but you do not as is proper begin a new paragraph when you change your subject. Attend to these hints and you will deserve more credit from a few lines well adjusted and written in a fair hand, than for a whole sheet scribbled over as if to fill or <missing text> the bottom of the paper, was the principal <missing text> or design of the letter.

I make these remarks not from your letter to me, but because many of those to your Grandmama appear to have been written in too much haste; and because this is the time to form your character, improve your diction.

This much by way of advice and admonition. Let me touch a little now, on your George Town Ball; and happy, thrice happy, for the fair who were assembled on the occasion, that there was a man to spare; for had there been seventy nine Ladies & only seventy eight Gentlemen, there might, in the course of the evening, have been some disorder among the caps; notwithstanding the apathy which one of the company entertains for the "youth of the present day, and her determination never to give herself a moments uneasiness on account of any of them." A hint here; men & women feel the same inclinations towards each other now that they always have done, and which they will continue to do until there is a new order of things. And you, as others have done, may find perhaps, that the passions of your sex are easier roused than allayed. Do not therefore boast too soon, nor too strongly, of your insensibility to, or resistance of its powers.

In the composition of the human frame there is a good deal of inflammable matter; however dormant it may be for a while, and, like an intimate acquaintance of yours, when the torch is put to it, that which is within you may burst into a blaze; for which reason, and especially too, as I have entered on the chapter of advices I will read you a lecture drawn from this text.

Love is said to be an involuntary passion and it is therefore contended that it cannot be resisted. This is true, in part only; for like all things else when nourished and supplied plentifully with [aliment,] it is rapid in its progress; but let these be withdrawn and it may be stifled in its birth or much stunted in its growth.

For example--a woman (the same with the other sex) all beautiful & accomplished will, while her hand & heart are undispar'd of [turn] the heads, and set the Circle in which [s]he moves on him.

Let her marry, and what is the consequence? The madness ceases and all is quiet again: Why? not because there is any diminution in the charm[s] of the lady but because there is an end of hope. Hence it follows that love may and therefore that it ought to be under the guidance of reason. For although we cannot avoid first impressions, we may assuredly place them under

guard; and my motives in treating on this subject are to show you, "whilst you remain Eleanor [Parke] Custis Spinster, and retain the resolution to love with moderation" the propriety of adhering to the latter; at least until you have secured your game, and the way by which it is to be accomplished. When the fire is beginning to kindle, and your heart growing warm, propound these questions to it. Who is the invader? Have I competent knowledge of him? Is he a man of good character? A man of sense? For be assured a sensible woman can never be happy with a fool. What has been his walk in life? Is he a gambler? a spendthrift, a drunkard? Is his fortune sufficient to maintain me in the manner I have been accustomed to live, and my sisters do live? and is he one to whom my friends can have no reasonable objection? If these interrogations can be satisfactorily answered there will remain but one more to be asked; that however is an important one. Have I sufficient ground to conclude that his affections are enjoyed by me? Without this, the heart of sensibility will struggle against a passion that is not reciprocated; delicacy, custom, or call it by what epithet you will having precluded all advances on your part, the declaration without the most indirect invitation on yours must proceed from the man to render it permanent & valuable. And nothing short of good sense, and an easy unaffected conduct can draw the line between prudery & coquetry; both of which are equally despised by men of understanding; and soon or late, will recoil upon the actor.

Flirting is hardly a degree removed from the latter and both are punished by the counter game of men, who see this the case & act accordingly. In a word it would be no great departure from truth to say that it rarely happens otherwise, than that a thorough[-paced] coquette dies in celibacy, as a punishment for her attempts [to] mislead others; by encouraging looks, words, or actions, given for no other purpose than to draw men on to make overtures that they may be rejected.

This day according to our information gives a husband to your dear sister; and <missing text>, it is presumed her fondest desires.

The dawn (with us) is bright, and propitious I hope, of her future happiness; for a full measure of which she and Mr. Law have my earnest wishes.

Compliments & congratulations on this occasion, and best regards are presented to your Mama, Dr. Stuart & family, and every blessing, among which a good husband when you want & deserve one, is bestowed on you by

Your affectionate

Go. Washington

### **Fragments of Washington's letter to Eleanor Parke Custis**

**21 March 1796**

(courtesy of Bodleian Library, Oxford University -- click on images for larger view)

Nelly married George Washington's nephew Lawrence Lewis (1767-1839), a son of the President's sister Betty, on 22 February 1799. Nelly found

marriage less than envisioned. Their relationship quickly deteriorated and the marriage was not a happy one (Brady, Washington's Beautiful Nelly, 7-12, 71n).

### **Washington to Betsey Parke Custis**

**14 September 1794**

Washington gave cautionary advice on selecting one's marriage partner to teenage granddaughter Betsey in the following letter, saying in part "Do not then in your contemplation of the marriage state, look for perfect felicity before you consent to wed. Nor conceive, from the fine tales the Poets & lovers of old have told us, of the transports of mutual love, that heaven has taken its abode on earth: Nor do not deceive yourself in supposing, that the only mean by which these are to be obtained, is to drink deep of the cup, & revel in an ocean of love..."

German Town [Pennsylvania] Sepr 14th 1794

My dear Betsy,

Shall I, in answer to your letter of the 7th instant say-- when you are as near the Pinnacle of happiness as your sister Patcy conceives herself to be; or when your candour shines more conspicuously than it does in that letter, that I will then, comply with the request you have made, for my Picture?

NO--I will grant it without either: for if the latter was to be a preliminary, it would be sometime I apprehend before that Picture would be found pendant at your breast; it not being within the bounds of probability that the contemplation of an inanimate thing, whatever might be the reflections arising from the possession of it, can be the only wish of your heart.

Respect may place it among the desirable objects of it, but there are emotions of a softer kind, to wch the heart of a girl turned of eighteen, is susceptible, that must have generated much warmer ideas, although the fruition of them may, apparently, be more distant than those of your sister's. Having (by way of a hint) delivered a sentiment to Patty, which may be useful to her (if it be remembered after the change that is contemplated, is consummated) I will suggest another, more applicable to yourself.

Do not then in your contemplation of the marriage state, look for perfect felicity before you consent to wed. Nor conceive, from the fine tales the Poets & lovers of old have told us, of the transports of mutual love, that heaven has taken its abode on earth: Nor do not deceive yourself in supposing, that the only mean by which these are to be obtained, is to drink deep of the cup, & revel in an ocean of love. Love is a mighty pretty thing; but like all other delicious things, it is cloying; and when the first transports of the passion begins to subside, which it assuredly will do, and yield-- oftentimes too late--to more sober reflections, it serves to evince, that love is too dainty a food to live upon alone, and ought not to be considered farther than as a necessary ingredient for that matrimonial happiness which results from a combination of causes; none of which are of greater importance, than that the object on whom it is placed, should possess good

sense--good dispositions--and the means of supporting you in the way you have been brought up. Such qualifications cannot fail to attract (after marriage) your esteem & regard, into wch or into disgust, sooner or later, love naturally resolves itself; and who at the sametime, has a claim to the respect, & esteem of the circle he moves in. Without these, whatever may be your first impressions of the man, they will end in disappointment; for be assured, and experience will convince you, that there is no truth more certain, than that all our enjoyments fall short of our expectations; and to none does it apply with more force, than to the gratification of the passions. You may believe me to be always, & sincerely Your Affectionate  
Go: Washington

**Washington to Betsey Parke Custis and her fiance Thomas Law  
10 February 1796**

Elizabeth "Betsey" Parke Custis

Thomas Law

Portraits from Greenleaf and Law in the Federal City (Allen C. Clark, 1901). When Betsey Custis wrote her grandfather to announce her engagement to Thomas Law, an enterprising businessman with two children, Washington gave his "approbation" of the marriage, although the unexpected announcement came as a "Surprize" to him. Betsey's letter, written on 1 February 1796 and received by Washington on Saturday, 6 February, has not been found. Below are the letters Washington wrote in response to the engagement, one to Betsey and another to her fiancé, Thomas Law.

Philadelphia 10th Feby 1796

My dear Betsey

I have obeyed your injunction in not acknowledging the receipt of your letter of the first instant until I should hear from Mr. Law. This happened yesterday--I therefore proceed to assure you--if Mr Law is the man of your choice, of wch there can be no doubt, as he has merits to engage your affections, and you have declared that he has not only done so, but that you find, after a careful examination of your heart, you cannot be happy without him--that your alliance with him meets my approbation. Yes, Betsey, and this approbation is accompanied with my fervent wishes that you may be as happy in this important event as your most sanguine imagination has ever presented to your view. Along with these wishes, I bestow on you my choicest blessings.

Nothing contained in your letter--in Mr Laws--or in any other from our friends intimate when you are to taste the sweets of Matrimony--I therefore call upon you, who have more honesty than disguise, to give me the details. Nay more, that you will relate all your feelings to me on this occasion: or as a Quaker would say "all the workings of the spirit within."

This, I have a right to expect in return for my blessing, so promptly bestowed, after you had concealed the matter from me so long. Being



entitled therefore to this confidence, and to a compliance with my requests, I shall look forward to the fulfilment of it.

If after marriage Mr Laws business should call him to this City, the same room which Mr Peter & your sister occupied will accomodate you two; and it will be equally at your service.

You know how much I love you--how much I have been gratified by your attentions to those things which you had reason to believe were grateful to my feelings. And having no doubt of your continuing the same conduct, as the effect will be pleasing to me, and unattended with any disadvantage to yourself--I shall remain with the sincerest friendship, & the most affectionate regard always yours

Go: Washington

To Thomas Law

Philadelphia 10th Feb. 1796.

Sir

Yesterday's Mail brought me your letter of the 4th Instant; and that of Saturday [6 February] announced from Miss Custis herself, the Union which is pending between you. No intimation of this event, from any quarter, having been communicated to us before, it may well be supposed that it was a matter of Surprise.

This being premised, I have only to add, that as the parties most interested are agreed, my approbation, in which Mrs Washington unites, is cordially given; accompanied with best wishes that both of you may be supremely happy in the alliance. I must however, tho' it is no immediate concern of mine--be permitted to hope, as the young lady is in her non-age, that preliminary measures has been, or will be arranged with her Mother & Guardian, before the Nuptials are solemnized.

We shall hope that your fortunes (if not before) will, by this event, be fixed in America; for it would be a heart rending circumstance, if you should seperate Eliza from her friends in this country. Whether the marriage is to take place soon, or late, we have no data to judge from but be it as it will, if you should bring her to Philadelphia, we invite you both to this house. With very great esteem and regard I am Sir--Your obedt Hble Servant

Go: Washington

### **Washington to G.W. Parke Custis**

**13 June 1798**

### **and reply from Custis to Washington, 17 June 1798**

Despite Washington's expressed belief in non-interference in the romantic lives of others, he was considerably less restrained in the advice he gave to his seventeen-year-old grandson George Washington Parke Custis in June 1798.

At the time of the following signed letter, located in the Custis Papers at the Virginia Historical Society, Custis was a student at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. He had enrolled there in March after having left the

College of New Jersey at Princeton the previous October under less than favorable conditions. Custis's academic career, thus far, was a disappointment to his family and caused his grandfather much concern. Now a possible romantic entanglement threatened the young man's already tenuous pursuit of an education.

Dear Washington, Mount Vernon 13th June 1798

It is now near four weeks since any person of this family has heard from you, although you were requested to write to some one in it, once a fortnight, knowing (as you must do) how apt your Grandmama is to suspect that you are sick, or some accident has happened to you, when you omit this?

I have said, that none of us have heard from you, but it behoves me to add, that from persons in Alexandria, lately from Annapolis, we have, with much surprise, been informed of your devoting much time, to paying particular attentions to, a certain young lady of that place! Knowing that conjectures are often substituted for facts, and idle reports are circulated without foundation, we are not disposed to give greater credit to these than what arises from a fear that your application to Books is not such as it ought to be; and that the hours which might be more profitably employed at your studies, are mispent in this manner.

Recollect the saying of the wise man, "That there is a time for all things" and sure I am it is not a time for you to think of forming a serious attachment of this kind, and particular attentions without, this would be [dishonourable]and might involve a [consequence] of wch you are not aware. In forming a connection, which is to be binding for life, many considerations, besides the mere gratification of the passions, and of more durability, are essential to happiness. These, in a boy of your age, all yield to the latter; which, when indulged, too often fleets away, and when it is too late, the others occur with sorrow & repentance. Among other considerations nothing is more desirable than to be connected with an irreproachable family--But As I am willing to believe the report is groundless, and that you have not forgotten so soon the admonition I have so often given you; and the exhortation at parting, to forsake all things & cleve to your Books, until a regular & proper system of education is completed; not merely such an one as you may be content with, but such as your Tutors and friends, better judges than yourself shall prescribe.

I will add no more at present, than that the family here are well as usual; and that I wish to remain, so far as your own conduct will let me be, Your sincere friend, and Affectionate Advisor

Go: Washington

In a letter of 17 June 1798, Custis hastened to assure his grandfather that the danger was past:

The report, as mamma tells me, of my being engaged to the young lady in question, is strictly erroneous. That I gave her reason to believe in my attachment to her, I candidly allow, but that I would enter into engagements

inconsistent with my duty or situation, I hope your good opinion of me will make you disbelieve. That I stated to her my prospects, duty, and dependance upon the absolute will of my friends, I solemnly affirm. That I solicited her affection, and hoped, with the approbation of my family, to bring about a union at some future day, I likewise allow. The conditions were not accepted, and my youth being alleged by me as an obstacle to the consummation of my wishes at the present time (which was farthest from my thoughts), I withdrew, and that on fair and honorable terms, to the satisfaction of my friends.

The original manuscript copy of this letter has not been found, but it is included in Custis's Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington and is printed in the Retirement Series, 2:335-36. The "young lady in question" was probably Elizabeth Jennings, the daughter of Thomas and Juliana Jennings, who lived in the Paca House on Prince George Street in Annapolis. Later that summer Custis would refer to his "happy escape" (David Stuart to George Washington, 22 August 1798, Retirement Series, 2:558). To his grandfather's relief, no doubt, Custis waited until 1804 to marry. His wife was Mary Lee Fitzhugh, the daughter of William Fitzhugh of Chatham and his wife Anne Randolph. Custis's daughter Mary would eventually marry Robert E. Lee, thus joining two prominent Virginia families.

### **Washington to William Gordon**

**20 December 1784**

Washington was not always so serious in his thoughts on love and marriage, particularly when it came to his contemporaries.

With tongue in cheek, in a letter of 20 December 1784 to the historian William Gordon, he remarked upon the recent marriage of Revolutionary war veteran Joseph Ward, who was 47 at the time of his marriage to Prudence Bird:

I am glad to hear that my old acquaintance Colo. Ward is yet under the influence of vigorous passions--I will not ascribe the intrepidity of his late enterprize to a mere flash of desires, because, in his military career he would have learnt how to distinguish between false alarms & a serious movement. Charity therefore induces me to suppose that like a prudent general, he had reviewed his strength, his arms, & ammunition before he got involved in an action--But if these have been neglected, & he has been precipitated into the measure, let me advise him to make the first onset upon his fair del Tobosa, with vigor, that the impression may be deep, if it cannot be lasting, or frequently renewed!

### **Washington to Sally Ball Haynie**

**11 February 1798**

Washington's advice to another young relative focused on a different aspect of courtship and marriage. Sally Ball Haynie, described as a "beautiful young girl," was an impoverished niece of Washington's mother. Both she

and her mother, Elizabeth Haynie, who was probably the daughter of Mary Ball Washington's half sister Elizabeth Johnson, received financial support from George Washington. Thus, in his letter of 11 February 1798 to Sally, of which a signed letterpress copy is in the Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington emphasized personal attributes, which would attract an appropriate marriage partner, that were slightly different from those he extolled to his granddaughters:

But as you have no fortune to support you, Industry, economy, and a virtuous conduct are your surest resort, and best dependance. In every station of life, these are commendable but in the one in which it has pleased Providence to place you, it is indispensably necessary that they should mark all your footsteps. It is no disparagement to the first lady in the Land to be constantly employed, at some work or another; to you, it would prove, in addition to a chaste & unsullied reputation the surest means of attracting the notice of some man with whom your future fortune will be united in Matrimonial bond and without which it would be vain to expect a person of worth.

**Washington to Betsey Parke Custis  
and her fiance Thomas Law**

**10 February 1796**

Elizabeth "Betsey" Parke Custis

Thomas Law

Portraits from Greenleaf and Law in the Federal City (Allen C. Clark, 1901).

When Betsey Custis wrote her grandfather to announce her engagement to Thomas Law, an enterprising businessman with two children, Washington gave his "approbation" of the marriage, although the unexpected announcement came as a "Surprize" to him. Betsey's letter, written on 1 February 1796 and received by Washington on Saturday, 6 February, has not been found. Below are the letters Washington wrote in response to the engagement, one to Betsey and another to her fiancé, Thomas Law.

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If after marriage Mr Laws business should call him to this City, the same room which Mr Peter & your sister occupied will accomodate you two; and it will be equally at your service.

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Yesterday's Mail brought me your letter of the 4th Instant; and that of Saturday [6 February] announced from Miss Custis herself, the Union which is pending between you. No intimation of this event, from any quarter, having been communicated to us before, it may well be supposed that it was a matter of Surprise.

This being premised, I have only to add, that as the parties most interested are agreed, my approbation, in which Mrs Washington unites, is cordially given; accompanied with best wishes that both of you may be supremely happy in the alliance. I must however, tho' it is no immediate concern of mine--be permitted to hope, as the young lady is in her non-age, that preliminary measures has been, or will be arranged with her Mother & Guardian, before the Nuptials are solemnized.

We shall hope that your fortunes (if not before) will, by this event, be fixed in America; for it would be a heart rending circumstance, if you should separate Eliza from her friends in this country. Whether the marriage is to take place soon, or late, we have no data to judge from but be it as it will, if you should bring her to Philadelphia, we invite you both to this house. With very great esteem and regard I am Sir--Your obedt Hble Servant

Go: Washington

**Washington to G.W. Parke Custis**

**13 June 1798**

**And reply from Custis to Washington, 17 June 1798**

Despite Washington's expressed belief in non-interference in the romantic lives of others, he was considerably less restrained in the advice he gave to his seventeen-year-old grandson George Washington Parke Custis in June 1798.

At the time of the following signed letter, located in the Custis Papers at the Virginia Historical Society, Custis was a student at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. He had enrolled there in March after having left the College of New Jersey at Princeton the previous October under less than favorable conditions. Custis's academic career, thus far, was a disappointment to his family and caused his grandfather much concern. Now a possible romantic entanglement threatened the young man's already tenuous pursuit of an education.

Dear Washington, Mount Vernon 13th June 1798

It is now near four weeks since any person of this family has heard from you, although you were requested to write to some one in it, once a fortnight, knowing (as you must do) how apt your Grandmama is to suspect that you are sick, or some accident has happened to you, when you omit this?

I have said, that none of us have heard from you, but it behoves me to add, that from persons in Alexandria, lately from Annapolis, we have, with much surprise, been informed of your devoting much time, to paying particular attentions to, a certain young lady of that place! Knowing that conjectures are often substituted for facts, and idle reports are circulated without foundation, we are not disposed to give greater credit to these than what arises from a fear that your application to Books is not such as it ought to be; and that the hours which might be more profitably employed at your studies, are mispent in this manner.

Recollect the saying of the wise man, "That there is a time for all things" and sure I am it is not a time for you to think of forming a serious attachment of this kind, and particular attentions without, this would be [dishonourable]and might involve a [consequence] of wch you are not aware. In forming a connection, which is to be binding for life, many considerations, besides the mere gratification of the passions, and of more durability, are essential to happiness. These, in a boy of your age, all yield to the latter; which, when indulged, too often fleets away, and when it is too late, the others occur with sorrow & repentance. Among other considerations nothing is more desirable than to be connected with an irreproachable family--But As I am willing to believe the report is groundless, and that you have not forgotten so soon the admonition I have so often given you; and the exhortation at parting, to forsake all things & cleve to your Books, until a regular & proper system of education is completed; not merely such an one as you may be content with, but such as your Tutors and friends, better judges than yourself shall prescribe.

I will add no more at present, than that the family here are well as usual; and that I wish to remain, so far as your own conduct will let me be, Your sincere friend, and Affectionate Advisor

Go: Washington

In a letter of 17 June 1798, Custis hastened to assure his grandfather that the danger was past:

The report, as mamma tells me, of my being engaged to the young lady in question, is strictly erroneous. That I gave her reason to believe in my attachment to her, I candidly allow, but that I would enter into engagements inconsistent with my duty or situation, I hope your good opinion of me will make you disbelieve. That I stated to her my prospects, duty, and dependance upon the absolute will of my friends, I solemnly affirm. That I solicited her affection, and hoped, with the approbation of my family, to bring about a union at some future day, I likewise allow. The conditions were not accepted, and my youth being alleged by me as an obstacle to the consummation of my wishes at the present time (which was farthest from my thoughts), I withdrew, and that on fair and honorable terms, to the satisfaction of my friends.

The original manuscript copy of this letter has not been found, but it is included in Custis's Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington and is printed in the Retirement Series, 2:335-36. The "young lady in question" was probably Elizabeth Jennings, the daughter of Thomas and Juliana Jennings, who lived in the Paca House on Prince George Street in Annapolis. Later that summer Custis would refer to his "happy escape" (David Stuart to George Washington, 22 August 1798, Retirement Series, 2:558). To his grandfather's relief, no doubt, Custis waited until 1804 to marry. His wife was Mary Lee Fitzhugh, the daughter of William Fitzhugh of Chatham and his wife Anne Randolph. Custis's daughter Mary would eventually marry Robert E. Lee, thus joining two prominent Virginia families.

## **Washington to Lund Washington**

### **20 September 1783**

In 1783 Eleanor Calvert Custis, the widow of Martha's son John Parke Custis, contemplated marriage to Alexandria physician David Stuart. Mrs. Custis sought to acquire the thoughts of her former in-laws on the subject but did so indirectly with the assistance of Lund Washington, the manager of Mount Vernon and a distant cousin of the General. Washington responded to the question of Eleanor's remarriage in his 20 September 1783 letter to Lund, which survives as a letter-book copy in the Washington Papers at the Library of Congress:

Dr Lund, Rocky hill [N.J.] 20th Sept: 1783.

Mrs Custis has never suggested in any of her Letters to Mrs Washington (unless ardent wishes for her return, that she might then disclose it to her, can be so construed) the most distant attachment to D: S. but if this should be the case, & she wants advice upon it; a Father & Mother, who are at

hand, & competent to give it, are at the same time most proper to be consulted on so interesting an event. For my own part, I never did, nor do I believe, I ever shall give advice to a woman who is setting out on a matrimonial voyage; first, because I never could advise one to marry without her own consent; & secondly, because I know it is to no purpose to advise her to refrain, when she has obtained it. A woman very rarely asks an opinion, or requires advice on such an occasion, 'till her resolution is formed; & then it is with the hope & expectation of obtaining a sanction, not that she means to be governed by your disapprobation, that she applies. In a word, the plain english of the application may be summed up in these words--I wish you to think as I do; but if unhappily you differ from me in opinion, my heart, I must confess is fixed, & I have gone too far now to retract.

If Mrs Custis should ever suggest any thing of this kind to me, I will give her my opinion of the measure, not of the man, with candour, & to the following effect. I never expected you would spend the residue of your days in widowhood; but in a matter so important, & so interesting to yourself, children & connexions; I wish you would make a prudent choice; to do which, many considerations are necessary--such as the family & connexions of the man--his fortune (which is not the most essential in my eye.)--the line of conduct he has observed--& disposition & frame of his mind. You should consider, what prospect there is of his proving kind & affectionate to you--just, generous & attentive to your children--and, how far his connexions will be agreeable to you; for when they are once formed, agreeable or not, the die being cast, your fate is fixed. Thus far, & no farther I shall go in my opinions. I am, D. Lund, &ca

G: W----n

### **About the Custis Family**

Eleanor and Elizabeth Parke Custis were two of Martha Washington's four grandchildren. Martha's son, John Parke Custis, born during her earlier marriage to Daniel Parke Custis, had four children by his wife Eleanor Calvert: Elizabeth (Betsey) Parke (1776-1832), Martha (Patsy) Parke (1777-1854), Eleanor (Nelly) Parke (1779-1852), and George Washington Parke (1781-1857).

John Parke Custis died in 1781, and in 1783 his widow Eleanor married David Stuart, an Alexandria physician. The eldest two daughters (Elizabeth and Martha) lived with their mother and stepfather, while Nelly and her brother lived with their grandparents George and Martha Washington. Short visits between the two homes were frequent, but in the winter of 1795-96, when the letter from George Washington in Philadelphia to Nelly dated 21 March 1796, was written, Nelly was sent for an extended stay with her mother at the Stuart estate of Hope Park, located ten miles west of Alexandria in Fairfax County. George and Martha spent that winter in



Philadelphia so that the President could attend the First Session of the Fourth Congress.

(Patricia Brady, ed., *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851*, xix, 1-3, 20-23)

**The End**