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On March 30, 1877, the *New York Herald*, one of the largest newspapers in America, printed a passionate love letter that had been written on September 12, 1758. Surely not news, but the *Herald's* editors knew what they were doing. Nothing they printed that day created a greater sensation.

The letter was from twenty-six-year-old Colonel George Washington to Sally Cary Fairfax, wife of his close friend and neighbor at Mount Vernon, George William Fairfax – four months after the colonel had become engaged to Martha Dandridge Custis, the wealthiest widow in Virginia.

Here is the heart of the letter, exactly as it was printed:

Tis true I profess myself a votary of love. I acknowledge that a lady is in the case and further I confess that this lady is known to you. Yes, Madame, as well as she is to one who is too sensible to her charms to deny the power whose influence he feels and must ever submit to. I feel the force of her amiable beauties and the recollection of a thousand tender passages that I could wish to obliterate till I am bid to revive them. But experience, alas, sadly reminds me how impossible this is. . . . You have drawn me, dear Madame, or rather have I drawn myself into an honest confession of a simple fact. Misconstrue not my meaning; doubt it not nor expose it. . . . One thing above all things in this world I wish to know, and only one person of your acquaintance can solve me that, or guess my meaning. But adieu to this till happier times, if I shall ever see them.

Out of this welter of indirection and hints, was George Washington crying, "I love you! Do you love me?" The *Herald* editors believed that he was, headlining the piece "A WASHINGTON ROMANCE: A Letter from General Washington Acknowledging the Power of Love."

That afternoon, Bangs & Company would auction off this note and others in "a collection of rare and autographed letters" found "among the effects" of Mrs. Fairfax when she had died at the age of eighty-one in Bath, England, sixty-eight years before. The *Herald* quoted a Fairfax family member, who had told *Scribner's Magazine* that the young Washington "had a tender-

ness" for Sally Cary even before she married his friend. She had been the object of his "early and passionate love." But the article's author neglected to mention - or was unaware - that Washington's desire for her remained strong long after she married.

The letter created consternation among Americans who regarded Washington as the virtual incarnation of divinity. Only three months had passed since the nation's year-long celebration of the centenary of independence. No figure loomed larger in that festive time than the taciturn first president. Curiously, no bid was made for the remarkable document that Friday.

The next day, Bangs announced that the billet had been sold for \$13, an unbelievable price even considering that each 1877 dollar was worth about \$20 in our depreciated currency. Rumors circulated that J. P. Morgan had bought it, but no surviving evidence supports this. Whoever he was, the buyer evidently felt a patriotic obligation to remove the letter from sight.

The letter failed to resurface until the late 1950s when a determined Washington biographer found the original in the files of Harvard's Houghton Library. That discovery didn't stifle healthy debate over the letter's meaning, some historians arguing that it was a good-natured squib, the sort of risqué banter that men and women often exchanged in the eighteenth century. John C. Fitzpatrick, who spent several decades on his monumental edition of Washington's papers, maintained that the letter was a paean of praise to Martha Custis.

Fitzpatrick took issue with those who believed that Washington was professing his passion for Mrs. Fairfax despite his engagement to Martha. If that were correct, he wrote, every decent person would be forced to conclude that George Washington was "a worthless scoundrel" undeserving of respect or veneration. Clearly, this was one of those moments when the private life of a founding father crossed an apparent moral line and threw a disturbing shadow over his accomplishments as patriot and creator of a nation.

Sally Cary Fairfax was the daughter of one of the richest planters in Virginia, Wilson Cary, master of a splendid estate at

Ceelys on the James overlooking Hampton Roads, not far from Newport News. Cary stocked his houses with the latest English books and magazines and took pleasure in teaching Sally and her three younger sisters French. As a leader of the colony's legislature, the House of Burgesses, Cary brought his family each year to Williamsburg for an invigorating season of fancy balls, lavish dinners, and witty conversations, while the House was in session. The Carys enjoyed the pursuit of happiness long before it became the object of a new nation's aspirations.

A family anecdote attests to Sally's ability to draw male attention at an early age. One day while returning to her Williamsburg home, she encountered one of the many sentries on guard against possible raiders during one of the colonial wars with France. The guard demanded the night's password of Sally's coachman, who fell dumbstruck. Sally stamped her foot: "But I am Miss Sally Cary!" The sentry gulped and said, "Pass!" The officer of the watch had made her name the password as a compliment to the young lady.

At eighteen, Sally married George William Fairfax, son of William Fairfax, the proprietor of Belvoir, a grand mansion on the Potomac not far from Mount Vernon. The union meant that one day she might become not merely the mistress of this estate but a peeress to boot. George William stood a better than even chance of becoming the next Lord Fairfax, entitling him to sit in the House of Lords and preside over vast English holdings. Even more important, as Lord Fairfax, he would own 5 million acres in northern Virginia that King Charles II had given Thomas Lord Culpeper, a maternal ancestor of Lord Fairfax, in 1673.

This potentially glorious future probably best explains the match of a vivacious young woman to a rather timid young man with a dour, downturned mouth surmounted by a strong, hooked nose, and shrewd, close-set eyes. At six, George William had traveled to England to be educated by the Fairfaxes, who described him as a "poor West India boy." He was the product of a marriage between his amply endowed father and the obscure widow of a British artillery major in the Bahamas. Worse, someone in the family had floated the rumor that the woman had African-American blood. For 15 years, George William had endured the unlovely experience of his English relatives eyeing his complexion and debating almost openly,

and certainly humiliatingly, whether he was a mulatto.

An amateurish portrait of Sally around this time reveals a slim, dark-haired young woman most people would call handsome rather than beautiful. But the narrow face is nonetheless striking. The deep-set dark eyes suggest a subtly mocking intelligence, the nose is strong, the mouth firm and confident. Her waist is narrow and her bosom ample. It is not hard to imagine her leading some lively revels.

Sally came to Belvoir as a bride in 1748 and soon met sixteen-year-old George Washington. He was a frequent guest of his half-brother at nearby Mount Vernon. Lawrence, happily married to George William's older sister, Anne, was doing his utmost to rescue George - already a towering six feet - from the clutches of his widowed mother, Mary Ball Washington, who was trying to convert her oldest son into a surrogate husband and father figure for her four younger children.

George's father, Augustine Washington, had died when George was eleven. For most of those early years, Augustine had been an absentee father, traveling between his scattered farms and an ironworks that required a great deal of attention. He was a good businessman, expanding his holdings from 1,740 acres at the time of his first marriage to almost 11,000 at his death.

Compared to the Carys, Byrds, Lees, Randolphs, and the other first families of Virginia, the Washingtons remained "middling gentry." Their house on the 250-acre Ferry Farm, across the Rappahannock from Fredericksburg, where George grew up, was an eight-room frame structure not even faintly comparable to such stately brick mansions as Robert Carter's Nomini Hall or William Byrd's Westover. One writer recounts young George Washington's awe when he first visited the parlor at Belvoir with its elegant, English-made couches, chairs, and tables. At Ferry Farm, the parlor contained three beds. Mary Ball had been Augustine Washington's second wife. She was a physically imposing woman, large and vigorous, with an explosive temper. One commentator described her as "majestic." A boyhood playmate said that he was "10 times more afraid of her" than he was of his own parents. On one occasion, she rose in her carriage on Fredericksburg's main street to berate and lash a slave for mishandling the horse.