

The Cover Story

Ladies who became FIRST

Martha Wayles Jefferson – a Seventh in a Series by Randall Priest

Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson was born in 1748 at The Forest Plantation in Charles City County, Virginia, to John Wayles, a barrister and landowner, and Martha (nee Eppes) Wayles. When Martha Eppes married John Wayles, she brought with her, as part of her dowry, an African slave woman and the woman's half-black, half-white daughter, Betty Hemings. Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson was the eldest of seven half-sisters and three half-brothers. Her first half-sister was the child of her father's second marriage and died young. Her next three half-sisters were born of her father's third marriage. Her last three half-sisters and all three half-brothers were children out of wedlock of her father's relationship with Betty Hemings. One of the half-sisters was Sally Hemings. [Editor's note: Sally Hemings is a very long story of intrigue, mystery and history that may not be entirely accurate as written.]

Martha was reported to be above medium height, slight, with auburn hair and hazel eyes. However, no facial image of her survives. In fact, several depictions reported to be of Martha most probably are of her daughter, Martha (Patsy) Jefferson Randolph. There are no records of Martha having a 'formal' education; however, she was likely educated at home by traveling tutors. She was very skilled musically and played the pianoforte and harpsichord. Also, no record exists of her early years, but it is likely that she played a social role at her father's plantation and probably learned the basics of running a plantation which became a necessity when she married Thomas Jefferson [Figure 1, on front cover] and moved to Monticello [Figure 2, on front cover]. Martha's health became fragile and it is possible that she had diabetes.

In 1766, Martha married Bathurst Skelton, a planter. They lived at his plantation in Charles City County until his sudden death of a fever two years later in 1768.

Martha [Figure 3, on front cover] likely met Thomas Jefferson in Williamsburg, Virginia, in or about 1768 while he was a member of the House of Burgesses. They were third cousins. They were married on January 1, 1772. Following two weeks at The Forest Plantation, they set out for Monticello (Jefferson's plantation in the Piedmont). They lived in a one-room 20 foot square, brick building, the "Honeymoon Cottage" (later known as the North Pavilion), until Jefferson completed the main house. Both Martha and Thomas Jefferson enjoyed music. One of the furnishings he ordered for the new house was a 'fortepiano' and Thomas would accompany Martha on the violin.

Over the next fourteen years, Martha would give birth to seven children. However, only two would live to adulthood and only one past the age of 30 – Martha (Patsy) Jefferson Randolph.

During the first three years of marriage, Martha would accompany Thomas to the colonial capital of Virginia – Williamsburg – and take part in the social life there. She was separated from her husband during his tenure as a Virginia delegate to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia (1776). Thomas Jefferson served as Governor of Virginia (1779-1781) during the American Revolution. At a request from Martha Washington, Martha agreed to lead the drive

Figure 4



among the women of Virginia to raise funds and donate necessary supplies for the state militia of the Continental Army [Figure 4]; however, Martha had to ask another politician's wife to assume her duties due to continuing health issues.

The physical strain of frequent pregnancies so weakened Martha that she died on September 6, 1782, at the age of 33, just four months after giving birth to her last child. She is buried alongside her husband and eldest daughter at Monticello.

Thomas Jefferson was inconsolable after the death of his wife. Patsy was ten years old when Martha died and spent a lot of time with her father. They became constant companions. From the age of 12 to 17, Patsy lived in Paris close to her father while he served as U.S. Minister to France. Jefferson enrolled her at the Abbaye Royale de Panthemont, an exclusive convent school. However, Jefferson eventually withdrew her from the school when she expressed an interest in converting to Catholicism. In 1790, at the age of 18, Patsy married Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., a planter. Not only would she assume the châtelaine duties at her husband's plantation but also soon assumed the role of hostess at Monticello. She also began to direct the domestic staff of enslaved people who worked there.

Figure 6



Thomas Jefferson became President in 1801 and served two terms. As his Vice President, Aaron Burr [Figure 5], was unmarried, Jefferson would occasionally ask Dolley Madison [Figure 6], the wife of the Secretary of State, to act as hostess at the White House. Patsy stayed at the White House a few times. In fact, she lived in the White House for the 1805-1806 season as her husband was in Congress and gave birth to a child (James Madison Randolph), the first White House baby.

Figure 5

Largely through their correspondence, but also during his



lengthy visits home, Patsy Randolph became her father's comfort and close advisor, perhaps the single most important personal factor that stabilized him during his presidency. When the newspaper story that Jefferson and his half-sister-in-law and Monticello slave Sally Hemings had children out of wedlock was first widely reprinted in the first weeks of 1802, Patsy Randolph may have served a political purpose: she immediately joined her troubled father in Washington, along with her two children, Ellen and Jeff, and her sister Mary (Polly) Jefferson Eppes, as a sign of family unity. The usually non-church-going Jefferson also suddenly began publicly appearing at the Sunday religious services then held in the hall of Congress - always politically shielded by the presence of his two daughters and two grandchildren. Thomas Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, at the age of 83 in Charlottesville, Virginia, and is buried at Monticello.

Patsy Randolph became estranged from her husband due to his heavy drinking and mental illness. She lived for some time with her daughter Ellen and her family. She often visited her daughter Septimia Meikleham in Washington, D.C., and later lived there. Patsy died on October 10, 1836, during a visit to Virginia and is buried with her parents.

[Editor's Note: Aaron Burr has never appeared on a U.S. postage stamp for reasons that are both political and obvious to students of history.]

Reference: Postal Commemorative Society // First Ladies of the White House by Nancy J. Skarmear
The Presidents of the U.S. of A. by Frank Freidel // www.whitehouse.gov/1600/first-ladies