



# Martha Jefferson Randolph: Republican Daughter & Plantation Mistress

*Billy L. Wayson*

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These pages chronicle the account of a tearful child emerging from the grief of a young mother's death to seed a relationship that became the emotional sustenance of her father's republican aspirations, and who grew to be an indispensable helpmeet and the competent mistress of a plantation household in its waning days. "I with pleasure take up my pen to express all my love to you, and my wishes once more to find myself in the only scene where...the sweeter affections of life have any exercise," Thomas Jefferson wrote to his daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph. The two shared words of elation and rejection, despair and hope, engagement and loneliness. The underside of republican civic virtue is nakedly exposed in the story of Martha and Thomas Jefferson's deep, abiding relationship amid the throes of a nation being invented. Martha unselfishly provided the emotional sustenance for Thomas Jefferson as he unmoored his skiff from the safe harbor of ideology, casting it adrift into the uncharted seas of a new republic. This book is a story of a relationship--a social entity--not a full biography of Martha Jefferson. It describes milestones demarking many of the twists and turns encountered over the Jeffersons' life courses. Among the most prominent events were the loss of a young mother and dearest wife; extended engagement with the political public sphere; defending family esteem in the face of a relative's sexual shenanigans; and navigating domestic discord among imprudent in-laws. This fascinating relationship is explored along six principal themes. Affection, Plantation Household, and Public Sphere are familiar topics drawn from the extensive cultural, social, and political historiography of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Three additional themes-- Separation, Place, Debt--fill the pages of some 900 letters written by Martha, her father, her husband Thomas Mann Randolph, and others. Jefferson's exercise of republican civic virtue from 1790 to 1809 required repeated, extended, and unpredictable periods of living apart, which was especially painful after daughter and father had been together almost uninterrupted from 1782 to 1789. As a relationship, it is not unlike countless others, whether of notables or nobodies, but Martha Jefferson's unqualified affection for and lifelong commitment to the happiness of her father was a display of what may seem old-fashioned values of fidelity and sacrifice. In that sense, she can claim the honor and esteem her father assured would come from persevering and actively engaging with life.

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