

**Preservation Virginia/John Marshall House
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***“THE COMPANION WHO SWEETENED THE CHOICEST PART OF
MY LIFE:” the Enduring Love Story of John Marshall and His Dearest
Polly***

**Presenter:
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The Beginnings~



Figure 1: Young Polly Ambler
Yorktown.

Polly Ambler had it all—an exotic look, the dark complexion of her French Huguenot ancestry, and soft curls and brown eyes. She was the daughter of a prominent Yorktown family, and was part of the bustling life of a port city, and the nearby colonial capital of Williamsburg.

Her father, Jacqueline Ambler, was a patriot and had contributed money to the Revolutionary cause, but the war had cost him his position as collector of custom taxes. So, in 1780, he found himself living with his family in a small tenement house there in



Figure 2: Silhouettes of the Ambler Family

They were comforted, however, by the person who lived next door. The building housed the commander of the state artillery regiment, Colonel Thomas Marshall.

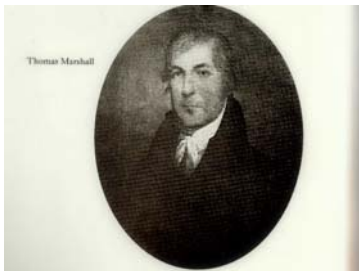


Figure 3: Thomas Marshall

Thomas Marshall had distinguished himself at the Battle of Brandywine where he had held Cornwallis at bay, and had two horses shot out from under him. George Washington singled him out for a commendation and the Virginia Convention presented him with a ceremonial sword. He was generally regarded as a hero. Marshall was a self-made man who had partnered with George Washington to survey the lands of Lord Fairfax. We can think of him as, “the new American,” meaning someone who, though not born into a

prominent family or had great wealth, could still achieve a position of power and authority.

He talked proudly with the Amblers about his first-born son and eldest child, John. Late in life, Thomas would write to his son, “You never seriously disoblged me in your life.” Colonel Marshall read letters from John to the Amblers, and when he announced that he was coming to visit him in Yorktown, Polly and her sister were thrilled.



Figure 4: Revolutionary War Soldiers

They were used to seeing American and French officers, but as Polly’s older sister, Eliza, wrote, “Perhaps no officer excited so much interest as Captain Marshall. Our expectations were raised to the highest pitch, and the little circle of York was on tip-toe awaiting his arrival.”

John Marshall fought in the Battle of Monmouth under the

command of Colonel Morgan. Their mission was to slow the advance of the English toward New York, which they did, and to, as Washington ordered, “Give them as much trouble as possible,” which they also did. Marshall was promoted to the rank of, “Captain,” after this battle.

John Marshall sometimes used leather thongs instead of buckles to close his shoes. He lost money through the holes in his pockets which had been mended once too often; he was even denied a room in Philadelphia because of his unkempt hair and unshaven beard. Of course this is the same man who would become the fourth Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and the one of whom current Chief Justice Roberts said, “Marshall is certainly the model to emulate, in his analytic rigor, coherent vision, collegial leadership, and dedication to both his country and the law.”

But in 1780, John Marshall, this lanky continental officer, born on the frontier of Virginia, and oldest of 15 children, had come to see his father, and the Amblers had arranged a ball in his honor.

Love Blossomed and Life Unfolded~



Figure 5: Colonial Ball

Eliza wrote, “We were emulous who should be the first introduced. It is remarkable that my sister, Mary, [Polly’s given name] then only 14, and diffident beyond all others, declared that we were giving ourselves useless trouble for that she, for the first time, had made up her mind to go to the ball, even tough she hadn’t been to dancing school and was resolved to set her cap at him, and eclipse us all.’”

Polly needn’t have worried, because, as Eliza later wrote, “I, expecting an Adonis, lost all desire of becoming agreeable in his

eyes when I beheld his awkward figure, unpolished manners, and total negligence of person.”

But for John and Polly, it seemed to have been love at first sight; “I was greatly pleased with her,” he wrote. But, how to court her? This is how he outlined his strategy: “As my attention though without any avowed purpose, nor so open or direct as to alarm...,” meaning that he was not going to come on too strong or do anything that would suggest that he was pursuing Polly. He began by accepting an invitation to attend a fish dinner at the Amblers the day after the ball. This makes one wonder if the Amblers didn’t have a strategy of their own!

Next, in what was considered a perfectly innocent and socially acceptable pastime, he began reading books from his father’s collection to the Ambler family—Sir Walter Scott, the American Book of Common Prayer, and poetry. “He read to us from the best authors, particularly from the Poets, blending improvement with our amusement,” wrote Eliza.



Figure 6: A Marshall Poetry Book

A book entitled, “A Collection of Poems, in six volumes,” descended in the Marshall family and bears the inscription, “John Marshall.” Published in 1775, it contained many poems by Alexander Pope, one of Marshall’s favorite writers.

John’s feelings, he wrote, “...soon became ardent and assiduous, her heart received an impression which could never be effaced. I would have had my wife if I had to climb Alleghenies of skulls and swim Atlantics of blood to have her.” Years later he would confide to his sister-in-law that he was, “... astonished by the present race of lovers who are so reserved in pursuit of one another.” Marshall, himself, is described by one author, “...as a very hurricane of a lover.”

In Polly, he had a woman he loved, but also needing a future, he enrolled at the College of William and Mary to read for the Law. Thomas Jefferson, who was then governor of Virginia, established a Professorship of Law at William and Mary, and George Wythe became America’s first law professor. Wythe required his students to compile a law notebook with decisions from court cases and basic tenets of law. Marshall’s was quite comprehensive and he was to refer to it often during his career. The notebook still survives in the collection of the library at William and Mary.

Sometimes, his mind would wander and he would write Polly’s name in the margins; on one page, her name appears three times.

By the next year, 1781, Eliza could see that Marshall was devoted to Polly. Also in that year, the Amblers moved from Yorktown to the capitol city of Richmond where Mr. Ambler had been appointed Treasurer of Virginia.

On the family’s stopover in Williamsburg, Marshall and

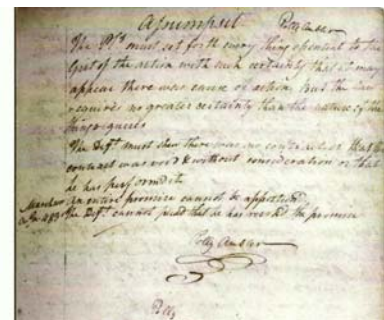


Figure 7: A Page from Marshall's Law Notebook

his school mates organized a ball in honor of the Ambler girls, and it was held in the vacant Governor's Palace in Williamsburg.



Figure 8: The Governor's Palace

From Eliza's account, the ball was a huge success, "The ball consisted of more Beauty and Elegance than I had ever witnessed before." But, as history bore out, the amiable and convivial Marshall always knew how to throw a good party.

Later that year, Marshall passed the Virginia Bar Exam, then left the military, and was elected to the Virginia General Assembly from Fauquier County. He then felt that he was in a position to ask Polly to be his wife.

When he asked her to marry him, she said, "No." As he rode away, Polly changed her mind, cut off a lock of her hair, and asked her cousin, John, to ride after Marshall and to give it to him. That was all Marshall needed to see and he returned to Polly. These actions raise two questions--why such a bold move on the part of a shy girl, and why so clear a signal to Marshall that it was worth it to return? Were they were both thinking of the poem, "The Rape of the Lock," by Alexander Pope? Was it one of the poems he had read to the Ambler girls while at Yorktown? The poem is about a suitor who secretly cuts a lock of his beloved's hair, causing a rift between their two families. A lock of hair was equated with a loss of virginity. Polly's decision to send her hair signaled that she was emotionally available to Marshall, and the message was not lost on him! One writer suggests that the story was altered to say that the cousin had snipped the hair to save Polly the embarrassment of seeming so forward. Marshall wasn't surprised though. He wrote that, "Though reticent, she concealed an exceptionally strong will. From native timidity, she was opposed to everything adventurous, yet few females possessed more real firmness."



Figure 9: Locket with Polly's Hair

Marshall had a locket made for Polly, which when opened housed the famous lock of hair. She wore this locket around her neck for the remainder of her life.

Their marriage took place January 3, 1783 at The Cottage in Hanover County, the home of her uncle, John Ambler.

Polly wore a white silk brocade gown, probably made especially for her. In those days, you would not think of wearing a garment just one time. Even wedding gowns were meant to be worn again, and remade if necessary.

Mary Douthat Higgins, a direct descendant of the Marshalls, wore Polly's remade dress for her wedding in the 1940's.



Figure 10: Mrs. Higgins



Figure 11: Marshall's Vest

More than any other item of clothing, a wedding garment seems to be the one most cherished by families. Maybe that's why a quilted silk vest belonging to Marshall, has survived over the years.

The newlyweds moved to Richmond and lived in several rented houses. Construction began on the current John Marshall House about 1788, and the family moved in in 1790. Family members owned it until it was sold to the city in 1910 and opened as a museum in 1914. They seemed to have had a rich and nurturing family and social life. Polly's family lived on the next block; Marshall's 14 brothers and sisters, and nieces and nephews were always passing through, and they attended the theater, dinners, and balls. John's sister, Elizabeth was married in their home, and several men courted their future wives in Polly's parlor.

At dinners, toasts would be given; Marshall's was, "To all our sweethearts." Another favorite was, "Our country free; our men honest, and our women fruitful." And Polly began to fulfill the expectation of those days: bearing children.

She gave birth to her first child the next year. The next baby died after five days, followed by a miscarriage a few months later. Recovery time from each pregnancy was getting longer and longer.

A four-month-old son died, followed six weeks later by the death of a three-year-old daughter. Marshall wrote in his account book, "Coffins for my son and daughter." Polly was inconsolable and left to stay with her mother. When she hadn't returned after two weeks, Marshall tried one last way to reach her; he wrote her a poem about the loss of a child; the poem has since been lost but it resulted in her return.

By that time, at the age of 26, Polly was showing symptoms said to be shared by her mother and one sister—extreme weakness, nervousness, sensitivity to noise, and periods of depression. When she was 63 years old, Marshall wrote to her in a letter, "Your general health is so delicate, your spirit so liable to depression, that I cannot control my uneasiness." So you see, the symptoms followed her to the end of her life, and terms such as, "invalid," and, "recluse," were used to describe her.



Figure 12: Marshall by Jarvis

John Randolph categorized Marshall as, "The Great Master of the Human Heart." Eliza, Polly's sister, wrote, "His exemplary tenderness to our unfortunate sister is without parallel. With a delicacy of frame and feeling that baffle all description, she became early after her marriage, a prey to an extreme nervous affliction which more or less embittered her comfort through life. But this only served to increase his care and tenderness."

Over the course of their 47 years of marriage, they each gave to the other what they could. Marshall had great resiliency, and in

his letters he encouraged her to associate with cheerful people, and to exercise and get fresh air. He bought her gloves, bonnets, black silk stockings, a mirror, and advised her to, “market liberally,” meaning, “go shopping.”

The earnings from his law practice were lucrative, about \$105, 000 a year and he could afford to hire companions and housekeepers for her.

The letters he wrote to her opened and closed with his thoughts of her. “My Dearest Polly, The time now approaches when I shall again see my beloved wife,” and, “Farewell my dearest wife, That Heaven may protect and bless you is the constant prayer of your ever affectionate , J. Marshall.”

He respected her intellect. Marshall once said that, “National character depends on the female.” A writer stated that Marshall “... maintained through his life and arrived to grave with a reverence for women. He didn’t like it when others, “...scoffed at the verities of women in his presence.” He chastised his friend and colleague, Justice Story, for not including Jane Austin on a list of notable authors.

His mother, Mary Randolph Keith, was said to be, “...pleasing in mind, person, and manners, and that he loved her with that chivalrous, tender devotion which made him gentle with all women throughout his life.”



Figure 13: Marshall's Mother



Figure 14: Harriet Martineau

Harriet Martineau, a leading feminist of the 1800’s, met Marshall and wrote that, “He had a steady conviction of women’s intellectual equality with men and with this, a deep sense of their social injuries.”

When Marshall was 73 years old and Polly, 62, and after 45 years of marriage, he wrote her this poem:

In early youth, when life was young
And spirits light and gay,
When music breathed from every tongue
And every month was May,

When buoyant hope in colours bright
Her vivid pictures drew,
When every object gave delight
And every scene was new;

My heart with ready homage bowed



Figure 15: Marshall by Peale

At lovely woman's shrine,
And every wish that she avowed
Became a wish of mine.

Now age with hoary frost congeals
Gay fancy's flowing stream,
And the unwelcome truth reveals
That life is but a dream;

Yet still with homage true I bow
At woman's sacred shrine,
And if she will a wish avow
That wish must still be mine.

My old wife! My youth grown rich and tender with years!



In 1830, Marshall wrote to her, "My Dearest Polly, I steal a few moments from business which I must devote to you. While thus employed, my imagination transports me to Richmond and I participate in all your solitudes. I picture to myself everything which passes between the time of your coming downstairs and breakfast and wish I could breakfast with you."

Figure 16: Marshalls' Bedchamber

A few weeks before her death, he wrote to her, "I anticipate a pleasure which I know you will share, the time when I may sit by your side by our tranquil fire and enjoy the happiness of your society."

There are heartening clues that Polly, in spite of her physical and emotional difficulties, was engaged with life with Marshall. A year after the death of her children, she signed a petition asking for mercy in the case of a free black woman sentenced to death for murder. She welcomed Lafayette to her home, and also President Monroe and his daughter, and President Madison and Dolley, although she excused herself after a short time.



Figure 18: Polly

Polly followed John's advice and even up to a year before her death, she was taking daily carriage rides. Six months before her death, she made a pillow for Marshall to sit on during his carriage ride to hear cases in Raleigh; he wrote, "I reached this place yesterday evening less fatigued than I should have been had you not been so attentive as to prepare me a good cushion." And, it appears that after 47 years of marriage, that she was still cutting his hair. He wrote her, "I think with tenderness of my sweet barber in Richmond. It is the most delightful sentiment I have."



Figure 17: John

Polly seemed to continue to fascinate him with her, "...playful wit and her fine taste for *belle lettre* reading. This quality for improving her talents for conversation contributed to a most desirable and agreeable companion. It beguiled many of those winter evenings during which her protracted ill health and feeble nervous system confined us entirely to each other."

Polly, perhaps because of her fragile health, brought out the best of Marshall's sensibilities, and maybe took a fine man and helped to make him an even better person.

For his part, Marshall knew that she was devoted to him, "...and all my faults, and they were many, could never weaken this sentiment."

Polly died on Christmas Day at the age of 65. One of her last acts was to remove the locket with the lock of hair from her neck and place it around Marshall's. Her tombstone reads, "This stone is devoted to her memory by one who best knew her worth and most deplores her loss."

Recollections and Reminiscences~

Marshall returned to Court and when Justice Story found him weeping, he said that, "I rarely pass a night without weeping for Polly." When he was in Richmond, he walked two or three times a week to the cemetery. On one of those walks, he collapsed and was taken to Philadelphia by his son, James. There was nothing they could do, and he died of, "disease of the liver." Dr. Chapman said that he died without pain, and that his mind was as clear and as strong as ever. By Marshall's direction, the last thing taken from his body was Polly's locket.



Figure 20:
Marshall's Dearest
Polly

The man whom Eliza had found anything but an Adonis would also write that, "Under the slouch hat there beamed an eye that penetrated at one glance the inmost recesses of the human character; and beneath the slovenly garb there dwelt a heart complete with every virtue."

A year after her death, Marshall wrote in a eulogy to Polly that, "From the moment of our union to that of our separation, I never ceased to thank Heaven for this, its best gift. I have lost the solace of my life."



Figure 19: Marshall
as a Young Man

We have no words from Polly about her feelings for Marshall. Perhaps because poetry meant so much to both of them, Shakespeare's Sonnet Number 29 would be a good substitute:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweepe my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate.
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope.
With what I most enjoy, contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For they sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my place with kings.

The Enduring and endearing love story of John Marshall and his dearest Polly.

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