

## Note to Reader

AS A JOURNALIST, I search for untold stories. I never would have imagined I'd find one hidden away for centuries in my hometown. This novel has been crafted from thousands of letters, journal entries, witness accounts, publications, and other sources related to George Washington, Mary Eliza Philipse, and historical figures, known and unknown to the modern-day public, who influenced their world and the birth of a nation in the eighteenth century. Maybe history wanted their romance hidden. I do not know. What I do know is that during my research in libraries, museums, church basements and through digital archives, document after document pieced together like a puzzle until I was awe-struck at the theory it revealed. Throughout, I've used the written or spoken words of Washington and those figures whose records have been preserved. I chose to present Mary and George's story as a novel rather than non-fiction because, despite relying on historical documents, I wanted to write what captivated me most: imagining their lives and in picturing the lives and habits of real flesh-and-blood young Americans in the 1700s.

My hope is that I've done justice to the story of George and Mary. Thank you for taking this journey with me.

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AN HEIRESS STANDING before him. The belle of the North. Glorious as love. George paused to take in her delightful face, her tender voice, her pleasant manner, her delicate hands, the gentleness of her dark eyes. It seemed she had no idea how lovely she was. How could it be that she carried not a hint of coquetry?

Mary Eliza Philipse.

He decided right then and there that he had never met a lady like her before. He wondered if men lost portions of their hearts to women like her. “A fair-faced vision who carries the scent of wildflowers—” Captain Stewart was correct in his assessment. She smelled as if she had been lying in a garden of lavender blooms. He enjoyed the thought of it. Her complexion, fair and smooth, glowed. Her lips carried a luster of reddish tone. Shiny waves tumbled over her round and quite shimmery shoulders. She carried a softened shape, just as his men described, which looked as if nature had formed it from a perfect mold. Her waist was so small, it seemed his fingers would touch if he wrapped his hands around it. Her gown was highly ornamented, though she needed no embellishment. Her natural grace alone was enough.

George gazed at her once more, trying not to let his eyes linger on

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her face for longer than appropriate. He realized he did not know of her mother's passing. His secretary, Kirkpatrick, had assured him he provided every detail—her education level, her circle of friends, her properties. Clearly, he had not learned enough.

The banquet room was masterly appointed for the occasion, decorated with deep red and blue flower bouquets and with affluence displayed in every direction he looked. The beautiful one stepped in first and motioned to a chair at the head of the table, to where his back would be to the hearth. It would not have been his choice of a seat as he always followed his rule: *Set not yourself at the upper of the table; but if it be your due or that the master of the house will have it so, contend not, lest you should trouble the company.*

His eyes remained on her as he was seated in a fancifully carved mahogany chair with such an extreme polish that it appeared wet. Then he faced the table, which was so laden with dishes, it was impossible to see a square inch of the table covering. Set in the most orderly fashion were blue-and-white porcelain plates with gold lining the rims. Each was filled with extravagant fare. Small dishes—there must have been more than fifty of them—covered the table. The loaf of oysters grabbed his attention.

How his life had changed. To night he was dining with the most well- to-do family in New York, quite possibly the wealthiest family across all of the colonies. It was not long ago that dining meant using a forked stick to cook food hunted from the woods and a large chip of bark acted as his plate.

“Are you comfortable in your seating by the fire?” Beverley asked, taking his seat.

“Humbled and quite appreciative.” George moved his chair closer to the table. “Happy's he that gets the berth nearest the flame.”

“Have your other hosts not treated you with polite attention?” Frederick's brow furrowed as he sat down.

“My journey has been an arduous one.”

“Arduous?” inquired Frederick.

“At times I had not slept above three nights or four in succession

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in a bed. I would lay down upon a little hay straw fodder or bairskin which ever was to be had. . . .”

Frederick raised his glass of Madeira to make another toast. “Let your days ahead be filled with hospitality and friendship. To the hero of the South!”

“Hear! Hear!” The guests raised their glasses to salute him. The heiress, sitting next to Frederick, did so as well. George’s thoughts turned to the feel of her smooth skin on his lips.

“Let us enjoy the banquet before us,” announced Frederick.

The mix of delicious aromas whetted his appetite. George had not eaten since the journey began at dawn. He was eager to satisfy his hunger. As he brought oysters to his tongue, one rule of civility proved challenging: *Put not another bite into your mouth till the former be swallowed. Let not your morsels be too big for the jowls.* Bite by bite, each magnificent taste finally settled his cravings. Tonight, though, he hoped hunger would be appeased not just in his stomach; it had been so long since he felt a woman’s touch.

This night ’twas truly a feast for his senses.

The sounds of tinkling crystal interrupted his thinking. His glass was filled to the rim immediately after each sip. The dishes were cleared. To his astonishment, new plates of blue-and-white porcelain were set down. He’d believed dinner was completed. A suckling pig was placed at the head of the table, a dressed goose at the foot, and along the table’s edges sat four roasted chickens. In the center were trays of crayfish, shrimp, and stewed dishes of hare, duck, boar, and lamb. Add to those, additional plates of pickled mackerel, mashed potatoes topped with a ragoo, partridges with truffles, and breads of many kinds. George was urged by Frederick to try the catchup.

“May we add our congratulations on your promotion, Colonel Washington,” said Frederick. “We are glad to hear of your accolades in His Majesty’s Army.”

“Your success and good fortune are the toasts of every table, Colonel,” Beverley added. “Every officer, I hear, is willing to venture under your command.”

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“Be not deceived,” said George. “I do not believe myself equal to such an appointment.”

“Is there a place for you and your companies to feast?” Frederick took buttered biscuit.

“The men must prepare their meals in their barracks. Each is equipped with a kettle and not much more for cooking.”

The heiress appeared astonished by his comment.

“Where have they set your post?” questioned Frederick.

“In Winchester. I have been honored to form a regiment made up of sixteen companies there.”

The color of rose juxtaposed against ivory as a gentle blush bloomed on the belle’s cheeks.

“Where have you arrived from this day?” She asked.

He listened to how she pronounced each word with a sweet inflection at the end of the question. “We were stopped at Laurel Hill.”

“Laurel Hill?” Her radiant face tilted.

“Of New Jersey,” he replied, “but not to gather laurels, except of the kind which cover the mountains.” It was a pun, and not a very good one at that. Still, Mary Eliza Philipse smiled.

THE DINNER PLATES were cleared away, as was the tablecloth. A new fabric that sent up a scent of mint replaced it. Then came dessert. Trumpets led a procession. A chef wearing a toque and sporting a curled mustache entered with cooks carrying plate after plate of confections. Three dozen types of sugary eatables, maybe more, were presented for the guests to try. Topsy cakes, pies of gooseberry, orangeado, plumb, cherry, and every type of pudding made their way into the dining room.

The chef then explained in a French accent the next dish he was carrying—enticing snowballs. George ate not one, but two. He made note, as well, of the numerous French-speaking attendants. It seemed the family paid no mind to the war. In addition, every race was represented in the household; a female cook entered and walked directly to the heiress, with a small bowl of pudding.

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Mary Eliza Philipse gave her an appreciative look.

George watched closely as the heiress kindly smiled and whispered, "I thank you. The desserts, the feast, all divine."

"As is the company," the lady quietly responded.

The guests arose upon completion of their feast and, led by Frederick, were escorted out of the room. Mary Eliza Philipse waited in her chair. George, with belly full and spirit soaring, approached her. With a shy smile, she placed her hand inside his arm, which he had outstretched to receive her.

GEORGE'S SMILE PIERCED Mary like a fork into sugar cake. Not a hint of vanity was demonstrated in his countenance.

*Colonel George Washington.*

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