

The Widow of Westover and Women's Rights

by Mildred H. Arthur

Treated like a traitor, Mary Willing Byrd declared, "This cannot be called liberty"

EARLY ON the morning of January 1, 1777, Colonel William Byrd III of Westover plantation on the James River, overwhelmed by his hopeless debts and embittered by the colonial resistance to England, which he opposed, put a bullet in his head. His widow, Mary Willing Byrd, was left in time of war with the burden of caring for her eight children ranging in age from two to 16, with another on the way. Her plantation was in chaos. Her circumstances had shifted suddenly from affluence to want.

Mary came from a prominent and well-respected Philadelphia family. Her father, Charles Willing, had at one time been mayor of Philadelphia. Her mother, Ann Shippen, came from an equally prominent local family. A bright, spirited, and articulate girl, Mary had received valuable education, probably more than most young ladies of her class at that time. One of her sponsors, Benjamin Franklin, also her godfather, took particular interest in her and guided her learning. While in Europe he sent over magazines and books he believed would strengthen her mind.

Mary met Byrd, a colonel in command of the Second Virginia Regiment, during the French and Indian War, while he was in winter quarters in Philadelphia. After a swift courtship, and barely six months after the sudden death of his first wife, the couple married. They built a house in Philadelphia and lived there for a time before moving back to Virginia.

Colonel Byrd's possessive mother,

Maria Taylor Byrd, had not been informed beforehand of her son's second marriage. She was shocked at the revelation. No doubt she was prepared to dislike her new daughter-in-law, until she learned of Mary's lineage and family connections, not too dissimilar from her own.

At the start of their relationship, Mary found her mother-in-law "a most sensible cheerful woman always gay and amiable." Mary was also charmed with the two youngest of the Byrd children who had been living at Westover with their grandmother. Nor was Mary less pleased with her surroundings. "This is the most delightful place in the world," she wrote home. "Col. Byrd has a most noble estate . . . a great part of Richmond is his and two other pretty towns entirely his, that are only divided from it by a most beautiful river."

Once returned from the military to private life, William Byrd resumed his former life-style of free spending and extravagant living. A relative of Mary's who visited them remarked at the lavish hospitality offered to the numerous guests who came through the open and always welcoming portals of Westover.

Along with receiving and entertaining her many guests, Mary cared for an ever-increasing family. In 16 years of married life she bore 10 children. During those years she was no stranger to adversity. According to an account written sometime in the 1850s by one of her grandchildren, Mary's life was saddened by the loss of her firstborn, a son, when he was about 18

months of age, through the carelessness of a nurse. Mary "had the horror to see him thrown on the pavement of the piazza, his head so much injured that he died of convulsions."

She coped with the problems of being wife, mother, stepmother, and daughter-in-law (over time her relations with Maria Byrd cooled). Nor could Mary have been unaware of her husband's financial difficulties. When the Treasurer of the colony and Speaker of the House of Burgesses, John Robinson, died in 1766, it was discovered that many prominent Virginians owed him large sums of money, none larger than William Byrd, whose debt was close to £15,000.

For Colonel Byrd, the resolution came on that bitter day in January when he let himself out of his difficulties with the gunshot to his head. But for his widow, it was the beginning of a long and difficult road.

While Mary fully intended to make good on her husband's obligations, her first concern was the welfare of her family. The children needed clothing, and she had no way to provide it. Because cloth was not coming over from England, and whatever silks and cottons that were available were too costly, she cut up the beautiful brocaded Westover curtains to make clothing for the children, using the lining for undergarments.

Because she believed she could handle her affairs better than anyone else, she acted as her husband's executrix and set about trying to restore order to their lives. The house in Williamsburg that Byrd had built on three



Oil painting of Mary Willing Byrd by Matthew Pratt; Virginia State Library



Previous pages: *Majestic behind tulip poplars in bud, Westover rises above the James. Mary Willing Byrd called it "the most delightful place in the world." William Byrd II built the Georgian mansion about 1730.*

William Byrd III (below) committed suicide in 1777, burdening his wife with huge debts. She saved Westover but had to sell other properties, including the town house (opposite) in Williamsburg, now used for Foundation offices. Mary Byrd's traitorous kinsman, General Benedict Arnold (right), victimized her during the Revolution, his British troops pillaging Westover.



Colonial Williamsburg

inherited lots was advertised for sale and brought a handsome price. The fine Byrd library, probably the largest in the colony at that time, so carefully collected by William's father, was sold intact to one individual. Slaves not deemed necessary for maintaining the plantation and not already committed according to her husband's will, were also sold, as were western lands that had not been previously assigned. She sold silverplate and whatever else was not essential that would fetch a decent price. Within three years she had gotten her business affairs in hand.

Mary might then have gone on with her life in comparative comfort but for a quirk of fate. Her beautiful young Tory-sympathizer cousin, Peggy Shippen, had in 1779 married the once popular American hero, Benedict Arnold. He was instrumental in forcing the British surrender at Saratoga in 1777 but, with his defection at West Point, was now turned traitor. As a brigadier general in the British army, it was expected that General Arnold would recruit loyalists and deserters from the patriot cause to help quell the rebellious colonists. Because of Arnold's relationship with Mary, suspicions fell on her as well. Giving credence to these suspicions was the general knowledge that Mary's husband had been a royalist sympathizer. All of which placed Mary in a dilemma.

If she did have loyalist leanings,



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Colonial Williamsburg

she was careful not to do or say anything that could be misconstrued as unpatriotic. With concern for her children in mind, she was determined to maintain an untarnished reputation, so that the family could continue their lives in comfort at Westover.

It would not be too difficult then to imagine Mary's state of mind when she learned on January 3, 1781, that a large British fleet was sailing up the James River toward Westover. Mary's first thought was to protect her older daughters. She hurried them off to a place of safety, Tuckahoe, higher up in the country.

Mary had no blood relatives in Virginia. Cut off from her Philadelphia family and friends because of the British occupation of that city, she had nowhere to go, especially "with so many little ones," as the grandchild stated in her account:

She and her neighbor, Mrs. Meade, determined to be together to cheer each other and try also to protect their property. When the British landed at Westover, I have heard her say there never had been so fine a prospect for wheat. The place looked most lovely, everything in beautiful order. To her great dismay she saw from the windows their horses turned in to graze, all enclosures broken down. She, her

family and friend declared to be prisoners in her own house. Guards were put at the foot of the stairs to prevent ingress or egress . . . with a promise of protection if she remained quiet and kept to the upper stories.

She witnessed the destruction of much of her property. Her plant nursery next door to the main house was used as a stable for Lord Cornwallis's horses, and her milk cows were butchered before her eyes.

Despite her efforts at demonstrating, at the very least, neutrality, Mary was suspected of being a traitor. This notion was enhanced by the reception she felt compelled to give her cousin, General Arnold, who, having disembarked at the Westover dock, came striding across the lawn at the head of a troop of black-booted, scarlet-uniformed officers of the British army.

No matter what she did, Mary felt she would have been condemned. Courtesy seemed the only appropriate response to the invasion of her home by the British, especially when the "enemy" had the upper hand and might burn her house, take her property, and harm her children. Arnold's two-day visit to Westover no doubt elicited Mary's most gracious hospitality, after which he and his men moved on toward Richmond, which by 1780 had become the capital of the colony.

The second visit the British paid to Westover was even more costly to Mary. When they left, they took with them 49 of her slaves, two ferry boats, all the grain and other supplies they could transport, and three fine horses, among them her daughter Maria's favorite saddle horse.

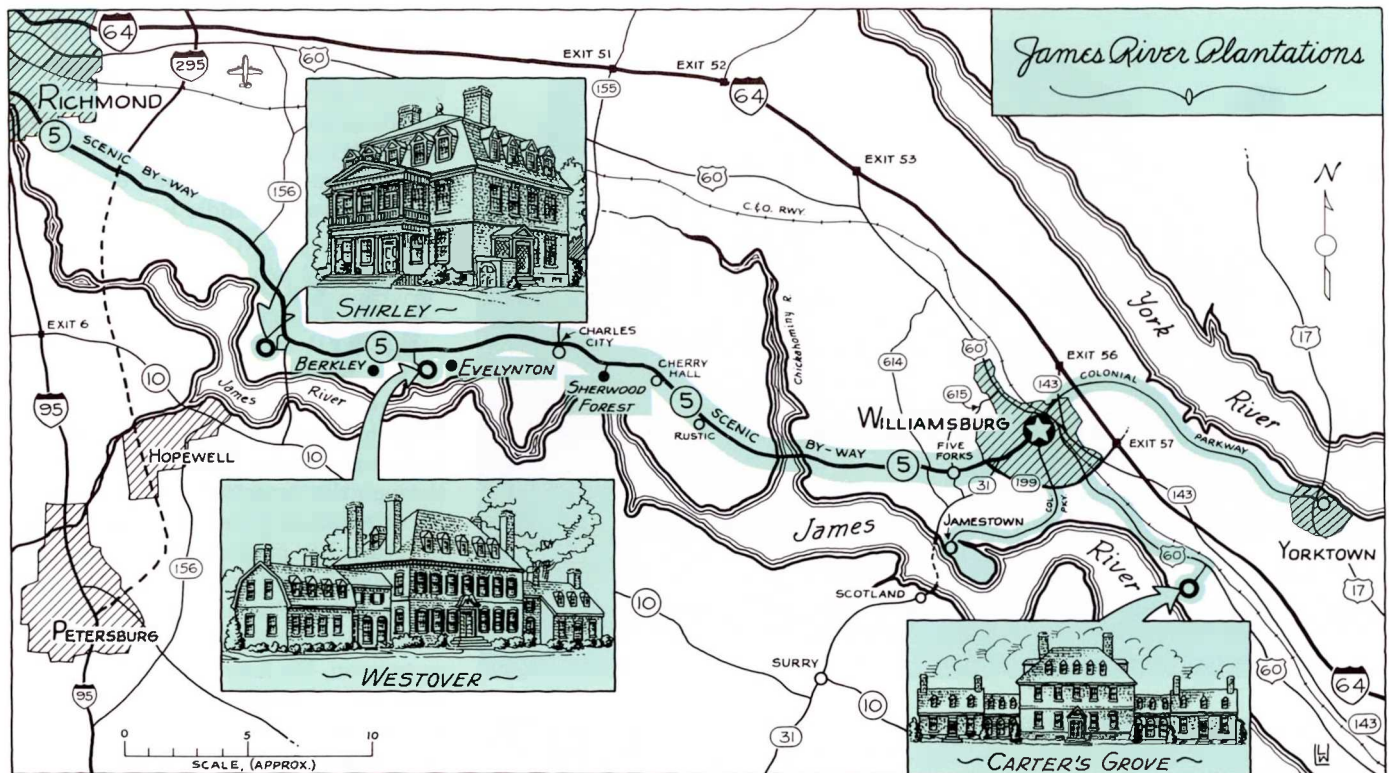
WITH CHARACTERISTIC drive and persistence, Mary succeeded in getting General Baron von Steuben to visit Westover and asked his help in retrieving her property. He authorized her to send a flag of truce through the American lines with a letter attempting to persuade the British to return her property. The letter, unfortunately, fell into the hands of a Major Tuberville, a rabid patriot who considered any traffic with the enemy as treason. He forwarded the letter to Governor Thomas Jefferson. Soon after, some Virginia militiamen raided Westover. Mary was locked in an upstairs room, while her private papers were searched and many carried off.

Outraged, Mary wrote to Jefferson on February 23, 1781, appealing for justice:

. . . I owe too much to my honor to betray my country. . . . When the officers landed I received them according to my idea with propriety. . . . If I have acted erroneously it was an error in judgement not of the heart. Every good man must have been shocked when they heard of the savage treatment I have met with. This cannot be called liberty. . . .

Mary was summoned to Richmond for trial in the General Court. She never found out who her enemies were, but was convinced they were not her neighbors who knew her best. She contended that Virginia had treated her unfairly "as a female, as the parent of eight children, as a virtuous citizen, as a friend to my country and as a person who never violated the laws of her country. . . . I have paid my taxes and have not been personally or virtually represented. My property is taken from me and I have no redress. . . ."

In presenting her defense, Mary was echoing the cause of liberty that the men of Virginia were espousing for



Palatial manor houses on the James River recall an era of landed gentry.

Louis Luedtke

themselves. To emphasize her point, not only as a woman but as a “virtuous citizen” and patriot, she adopted the language of the revolutionaries.

Mary *did* have friends. As a Virginian by marriage and a member of the aristocracy, she was accorded certain considerations. Witnesses against her were kept out of the way, so that no decisive action was taken in her case, though she would have preferred that her name be cleared in court.

While she never retrieved her property, she did survive the Revolution. In the fall of 1781, Cornwallis and his army surrendered to Washington’s forces at Yorktown. Though the peace was not signed until 1783, Mary’s life began to take on the aspects of normalcy soon after the surrender. Opportunities presented themselves, especially in the former capital city.

Mary and her eldest daughters attended parties where French officers—among them the Comte de Rochambeau, who was headquartered in Williamsburg, and the Marquis de Chastellux—were enchanted by her. She later invited the Marquis to visit her at Westover. In his book, *Travels in North America in the year 1780, 1781, 1782*, he described his hostess

and her surroundings in glowing terms:

She is about two and forty, with an agreeable countenance and great sense. . . . Her care and activity have in some measure repaired the effects of her husband’s dissipation and her house is still the most celebrated, and the most agreeable of the neighborhood. She takes great care of her negroes, makes them as happy as their situation will admit, and serves them herself as a doctor in time of sickness. She has even made some interesting discoveries on the disorders incident to them, and discovered a very salutary method of treating a sort of putrid fever which carried them off commonly in a few days, and against which the physicians of the country have exerted themselves without success.

Mary continued to live at Westover until her death in 1814 at the age of 74.

In her effort to survive in those tumultuous times, Mary Willing Byrd sounded a prophetic note. Her protest for her rights as a woman was persistent and courageous, her challenge to

traditional attitudes compelling. She broke out of the mold that relegated women to an almost totally acquiescent role. Her sober, unrelenting quest for personal justice marks her as one of the women—and there were a number of them in Virginia and the other colonies—whose actions were instrumental in effecting a gradual change in the perception of women as being docile and subordinate.

While the great majority throughout the 18th and into the 19th century continued to accept their secondary role in a male-dominated society, isolated voices took up the call for a more active female presence in the nation’s mainstream. The constraints that encircled the woman, not unlike the restricting stays she wore, began ever so slowly to loosen. But it was to be more than a century after Mary Byrd’s impassioned letter to Jefferson before these early stirrings would come to any measurable fruition. ▲

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