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Frances Anne Kemble (1809-1893)

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Recommended Citation

Karelis, Natalie, "Frances Anne Kemble (1809-1893)" (1998). *People and Places*. 4.
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Frances Anne Kemble

By: Natalie Karelis

A famous actress, an unfaithful husband, a controversial family business, a messy divorce, and a brutal custody battle. These seem to be all the characteristics of today's tabloid news. But maybe these components of a sensational news story aren't so modern after all. In fact, a situation fitting the above description, involving actress Fanny Kemble (for whom Fanny Kemble Park, located at Olney Avenue and 17th Street, is named) and slave-holder Pierce Butler, actually occurred over 150 years ago on property adjacent to La Salle University!



Fanny Kemble

Frances Anne Kemble was born into a theatrical family in London, England, on November 27, 1809. Her roots in the theater were well established at her birth, her aunt being the renowned actress Sarah Siddons and her father, Charles Kemble, the renowned Shakespearean actor. It was due to the financial trouble of the Covent Garden Theatre in London, which was owned by her father, that led her to acting in order to support her family. She made her theatrical debut as Juliet at age 19. She is known for creating the role of Julia in *Hunchback*, which James Sheridan Knowles wrote just for her.

In 1832, Fanny Kemble went on a theatrical tour of the United States from Boston to Washington with her father and her aunt Miss Adelaide De Camp. She was instantly a huge success in the States. She was copied and idolized by people everywhere. Young girls were seen sporting "Fanny Kemble curls," and her likeness appeared on plates, saucers, scarves, and other souvenirs. The theaters were packed every night of her performances. Miss Mary Channing, then a student at a school near the Tremont House, where Fanny was staying, remembers how all the school children were excited to see her go out for her daily horseback ride.

Fanny was so popular that she had men follow her from city to city. The most devoted of these men was Pierce Butler, who played the flute in her orchestra. He joined the Kemble family on their vacation trip and showered Fanny with lavish gifts. Pierce was a wealthy slave holder who inherited some of the largest and most productive plantations in the United States. Pierce's perseverance finally paid off when Fanny finally decided to accept his proposal. Her decision to marry Pierce was influenced by much emotional stress in her life. For one thing, she was separated from her family in Europe, and she felt much guilt in breaking her promise to her father to tour the United States again. In addition, her beloved aunt, Adelaide De Camp, was in a carriage accident and died after contracting an illness. Whatever the circumstances, Fanny married Pierce Butler on June 7, 1834 at Christ's Church in Philadelphia.

The bride was first taken to Walnut Street, which was the home of Pierce's brother, John. Pierce and Fanny then moved to Branchtown, or just above what is now Broad and Olney, where they lived from 1835 to 1840. The farm where they resided was called Butler Place, located at Old York Road and Thorp's Lane. Butler Place proved to be a lonely place for her.

At first she took an interest in making the farm attractive, e.g. planting rows of maple trees, gardens, etc. But eventually she isolated herself and had nothing to do with her neighbors. A 1922 newspaper clipping about Fanny states, "Nearly all local traditions allude to her haughty demeanor and the scorn with which she regarded the people of her region." A famous story about Fanny's isolation from her neighbors involves the Reverend George Bringham, the rector of the Episcopal House of Prayer in Branchtown. He called on Fanny, and she is said to have received him "sitting behind a screen and remained in the position during his call."

Fanny Kemble Butler was definitely the talk of the town. A diary entry of Sidney George Fisher dated April 19, 1840, states that Fanny was seen at Wakefield (home of William Logan Fisher, Sydney's uncle) riding horseback as she was always observed doing. An earlier diary entry talks about the marriage of Fanny and Pierce where Fisher states that he doesn't "like this custom of introducing actors into society." Jones Wister mentions Fanny and Pierce in his *Reminiscences*. Pierce was described as being a frequent visitor to Belfield. He loved the soup made from the Mexican Black Beans that were raised in the gardens there. Fanny is also mentioned in Jones Wister's book. As a young boy, Wister saw her at Champlost, home of Mary Fox, Fanny's good friend. He didn't like to eat there when Fanny was present because he thought her "too elegant and awe-inspiring for words."

The marriage of Pierce and Fanny began to disintegrate during the first year due to a variety of reasons. A major reason, which became evident in later years through Fanny's publications, was the rift between the slave-holding Pierce and the fierce abolitionist Fanny. Another reason stemmed from Butler's infidelities. He was said to be living with a slave woman during his visits to his plantations in Georgia when unattended by Fanny. In addition, he had numerous affairs with many different women. In fact, he reportedly participated in a duel with business partner James Schott who said he caught Pierce in bed with Mrs. Schott. Finally, Pierce hired a governess by the name of Miss Hall. She was described as having taken over everything in the household except for the name of Mrs. Pierce Butler. In addition to these reasons, Fanny and Pierce were not compatible intellectually or temperamentally. They had differing views on the woman's place in society--Pierce believed in submission while Fanny supported equal rights.

As the marriage weakened even more, Pierce used their two children, Sarah (b.1835) and Fanny (b.1838), as weapons in his battles with Fanny. She was forbidden from caring for them, talking to them, or any other kind of interaction with them. Miss Hall was given complete control over the children. In addition, she was forbidden from talking to her friends Mr. and Mrs. Sedgwick. Pierce tricked her into breaking this rule by presenting her with a letter from Mrs. Sedgwick. Fanny assumed that she was granted permission to open the letter since Pierce himself had given it to her, but Pierce seized the opportunity to say that she had disobeyed him.

After a series of estrangements, Fanny went back to England alone and returned to the stage to support herself. In 1848, Pierce filed for divorce claiming that Fanny had "willfully, maliciously, and without due cause deserted him" in 1845 when she went to England. Fanny at first denied the desertion, then stated that the separation had been by mutual consent. Finally, she stated that if desertion had indeed occurred, that it was justified by the insulting treatment of the libellant (Pierce). Fanny produced a sixty-odd-page book called "Narrative" which was referred to the Court as "a historical sketch of matrimonial discord." The court threw it out.

The divorce of Pierce Butler and Fanny Kemble was finally granted in 1849 because Fanny failed to appear in court. The decision, made by Judge King, established a precedent on what constituted such desertion in the state. It has since been referred to in hundreds of cases. After the divorce, Fanny resumed her maiden name and returned to England. She was granted an allowance of \$1500 per year, the mortgage to Butler Place, and permission to have the children two months in the summer. After the divorce in 1850, Pierce wrote "Mr. Butler's Statement" in

response to Fanny's earlier publication.

Fanny gave dramatic Shakespearean readings to support herself in both the United States and England. Mrs. Sarah Tyler Boas (Mrs. John) Wister, daughter-in-law of William Wister, while in London on a Grand Tour of Europe as a young bride, remembers hearing Fanny Kemble read *The Winter Tale*. Fanny also published a number of memoirs as well as some poetry. She lived in Lenox, MA in a cottage next to her friends Elizabeth and Charles Sedgwick for some time. After her daughters were married, she lived periodically with each of them. She came back to Philadelphia often after the divorce. On July 14, 1860, she came to see Owen Wister, who had just been born. In the Autumn of 1872 she went with the Wister family to Rome for vacation. It was during this particular trip to Rome where she met and befriended Henry James. The two remained close friends throughout their lifetimes. James wrote that Fanny was "one of the consolations of (his) life." After Pierce's death in 1867, Fanny lived at Butler Place. In 1874, she was living at York Farm on the Butler property.

After the divorce, Pierce's gambling got him into trouble. He was forced to sell much of his Philadelphia property and his share of his Georgia slaves in 1859. After losing much respect in Philadelphia during the Civil War for his southern sympathies, he was arrested by U.S. Marshals under suspicion of gunrunning for the Confederacy and later released on the condition of keeping his southern sympathies quiet. After Lincoln's death, he refused to drape his windows in black. There was almost an attack on his house which was stopped by a gracious abolitionist Morris Davis. Pierce contracted malaria in 1867 and died.

Fanny Butler is perhaps best known for her publications of her personal journals. She first published the *Journal of Frances Anne Butler* in 1835, which was a scandal to the Butler family. In 1838, she kept a journal when she went to the Georgia plantations owned by her husband. She received a great deal of pressure from the Butler family not to publish the journal. She finally did publish it in 1863, fourteen years after her divorce, entitling it *Journal of A Residence on A Georgian Plantation*. She published it mostly to persuade her native England not to support the Confederacy. The journal was written as a series of letters to Elizabeth Sedgwick. She composed her journal in rough form while on the plantation, and then later revised it. The journal makes a correlation between the gender-based oppression of slave women and her own subjugation in the legal and social systems of the 19th century United States.

Fanny and Pierce had two daughters, Frances Ann Butler Leigh (1838-1910) and Sarah Wister (1835-1908). Frances Butler Leigh married the Reverend James Wentworth Leigh, the dean of Hereford. Leigh was a British pro-slavery sympathizer and had a black face part in a Cambridge minstrel show. Frances was much more sympathetic to the southern cause than her sister Sarah. Sarah shared her mother's views of slavery. She married Dr. Owen Jones Wister of Germantown, an avowed abolitionist. Their son Owen wrote *The Virginian*. Interestingly enough, Owen shared closer views regarding slavery with his grandfather, aunt, and uncle.

Butler Place, consisting of 83 acres, was sold in 1916 for \$800,000. In 1925, Butler Place was torn down to make room for 500 rowhouses. Fanny Kemble's legacy can still be seen at the oasis at Olney Avenue and 17th Street: Here is located Fanny Kemble Park. A plaque at the entrance of the park describes Fanny's abolitionism and her contributions to the cause. At the age of 84, Frances Anne Kemble died in London on January 15, 1893, while being helped to bed by her maid. In a letter to Fanny's daughter, Sarah, Henry James wrote a tribute to his dear friend. "She went when she could, at last, without a pang. She was very touching in her infirmity all these last months--and yet with her wonderful air of smouldering embers under ashes, she leaves a great image--a great memory."

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