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## "Handing Down Remarkable and Interesting Circumstances": Elizabeth Carrington and Female Intellectual Inheritance in the Early American Republic

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**“Handing Down Remarkable and Interesting Circumstances”: Elizabeth Carrington and  
Female Intellectual Inheritance in the Early American Republic**

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**A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty  
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts**

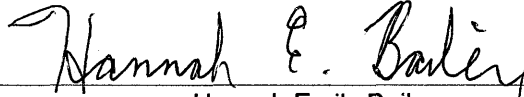
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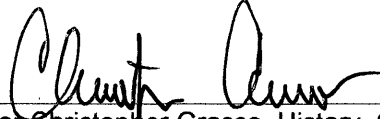
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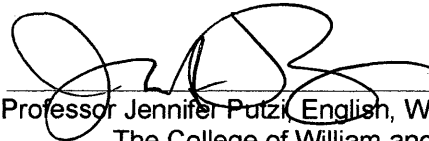


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## ABSTRACT

This thesis will analyze the Elizabeth Ambler Papers in the Rockefeller Library at Colonial Williamsburg to expand the definition of female historical memory in the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In her miscellany, spanning the years from 1780 to 1832, Carrington transcribed, organized, and annotated letters from her past. At times, she was very clearly writing down her own recollections, or private memories, of colonial Virginia, her experiences during the Revolutionary War and the subsequent new republic, and the lives of her immediate family members. She was also an author. She wrote very comprehensive biographies of deceased family members, as well as detailed accounts of colonial and revolutionary Virginia. Carrington wanted her memories preserved for educational purposes in both the present and future. She utilized these memories to forge her own niche in Ambler family history, and also to assert her family's place in the national narrative of her day.

This thesis will argue that Eliza Carrington compiled a collection of materials that asserted her own and her family's position in the Federalist founding history of the United States. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries she copied old material, and wrote new material that reflected both her desire to place herself within her family's history and her need to see herself and the family in this larger, national story. The current historiography leaves much to be desired when it comes to exploring how women actively integrated themselves into lasting narratives. Carrington redefines our understanding of women as memory keepers in the early American republic.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements   | ii  |
| Dedication   | iii |
| “Handing Down Remarkable and Interesting Circumstances”:<br>Elizabeth Carrington and Female Intellectual Inheritance in the<br>Early American Republic | 1   |
| Bibliography   | 45  |

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Finally, I would not be in graduate school at all were it not for my phenomenally supportive family. I cannot thank them enough for their love. I feel so fortunate that I can continue to "disappoint" them.

**This M.A. is dedicated to my parents and Mrs. Eliza Carrington. Their perpetual quests to acquire knowledge and share it with others continually inspire me.**

**“Handing Down Remarkable and Interesting Circumstances”: Elizabeth Carrington and Female Intellectual Inheritance in the Early American Republic**

On a mid-November day in 1799, Eliza Jacquelin Ambler Brent Carrington stood between two veterans of the American Revolution. One, Colonel Edward Carrington, she knew quite well. He was, after all, her husband. The other was well known to every American citizen, by name if not by sight, as the former Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army and first president of the new United States. When General George Washington greeted the Carringtons at Mount Vernon, however, Eliza Carrington saw him not as the austere and stately figure that his public appearances required, but as “the good old general.”<sup>1</sup> Washington and Col. Edward Carrington had remained friendly long after the Treaty of Paris was signed. At their reunion on that November day, Edward Carrington and Washington shook hands as long-standing associates. Once they had greeted one another, Washington took Eliza Carrington’s hand, squeezed it, and told her that she had “conferred a favor never to be forgotten, in bringing his old friend to see him.”<sup>2</sup>

This episode survives in a manuscript collection in the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library in Williamsburg—a collection that Eliza Carrington compiled herself in the 1830s. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, she copied old correspondence and wrote new epistles that reflected both her desire to place herself within her family’s history and her need to see herself and the family as part of a larger, national story. She recounted this particular moment in a letter to her sister. Carrington’s collection contains twenty-three different documents, all of which include numerous

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<sup>1</sup> Eliza Jacquelin Ambler to [Ann] Nancy [Fisher], November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799. Elizabeth Jacquelin Ambler Papers, Manuscript DMS 54.5, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Ambler to Fisher, Nov. 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.



personal memories that she believed important enough to record for future generations. While Carrington did not compile her collection into a book or volume, it resembles a “miscellany.” According to Catherine La Courreya Blecki, eighteenth-century miscellanies included anything from household accounts, to verses, to copies of correspondence that were useful “for education or for some future need.”<sup>3</sup> The texts in Eliza Carrington’s collection were indeed selected for educational purposes, but they also filled a more immediate need. Carrington felt she needed to reintegrate herself into her own family’s narrative after being widowed twice, and wanted her memories preserved for educational purposes in both the present and the future. She sought to ensure that her place in history, both her own family history and the history of the United States, was sound; Carrington aimed to achieve this through her collection.

The story of Washington and the Carringtons’ meeting at Mount Vernon demonstrates just how deeply she wanted to connect familial and national narratives. Occurring only weeks before the General’s death, this story is intriguing not necessarily because it happened, but because of how Carrington recorded its occurrence. George Washington had already been culturally and politically co-opted as the nation’s founding father. Because Carrington presented herself quite literally at the center of the story, she embodied the link between her family’s history and the history of the United States writ large through both the description she provided for her sister and her participation in the scene at Mount Vernon. By recounting this story, and preserving it for posterity, Carrington integrated her family’s historical narrative with that of the young nation for generations to come.

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine La Courreya Blecki in Catherine La Courreya Blecki and Karin A. Wulf, eds., *Milcah Martha Moore’s Book: A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 63.

Carrington's collection may be a rare, surviving example of female memory keeping in the early American South, and it remains extant because of both her and other Ambler descendants' archival efforts and contributions.<sup>4</sup> She would have been glad to know that, since the mid-nineteenth century, local, family and eventually professional historians have explored these materials to illustrate her and her family's position in the founding narrative of the United States. Carrington bequeathed the collection to Janetta Harrison, her niece and adopted daughter. Harrison then gave the collection to *her* niece, Anne Fisher Colston. Ann Fisher Colston, whose mother's name was *also* Eliza Jacqueline, had her children transcribe the letters in 1883. In 1915, Colston's son printed a bound transcription of the letters with notes and donated the collection of Carrington's original letters to the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library.

In 1890, George Daniel Fisher, Eliza Carrington's nephew and Janetta Harrison's brother, used her papers to assert family significance. Fisher, a fairly prolific Virginia historian in his own right, outlined the Ambler family tree from Rebecca Burwell and Jacquelin Ambler (Carrington's parents) on down the Ambler family line in his book entitled *Descendants of Jaquelin Ambler*.<sup>5</sup> The bulk of his evidence comes from transcriptions of his aunt's letters. This is not surprising as they appear to have shared a very similar goal—integrating the Amblers into a national historical narrative. However, unlike his aunt and grandniece's work, a Richmond press formally published Fisher's

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<sup>4</sup> Carrington's collection is unique in that it is both a material object and a literary one. Its physicality is important, as is its content and continued importance within the family, not unlike Hannah Barnard's cupboard as presented in *The Age of Hometown: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> George D. Fisher, *Descendants of Jaquelin Ambler, With Letters from his Daughter, Mrs. Col. Ed. Carrington, and Extract from his Funeral Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Buchanan* (Richmond: Wm. Ellis Jones, Steam Book and Job Printer, 1890).

research.<sup>6</sup> Judging by the fact that Fisher pursued the prominent William Ellis Jones as a publisher, one can assume that Fisher wanted his book to have a statewide, not solely familial, readership.

Eliza Carrington intentionally intertwined family stories with national ones but, in a turn of events that she probably would *not* have anticipated, Ambler family descendants were never the only ones to take an interest in the genealogical aspects of her collection. The uniting and reading of family histories was a much larger, national phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1899 issue published an article that featured Carrington's collection, as did *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*. *Some Prominent Virginia Families*, published by Louise Pecquet du Bellet in 1907, consisted of four volumes that focused mostly on "First Families of Virginia." The Jacquelin and Ambler families were featured heavily, and du Bellet utilized entire transcriptions of Carrington's letters as primary sources about the rise of these families throughout the course of the eighteenth century. In the April 1938 issue of *The William and Mary Quarterly*, one of Carrington's letters was reproduced in its entirety. The very month of the German election that brought Hitler's Nazi Party into parliamentary power, the *Quarterly* printed Carrington's letter recounting her visit to Mount Vernon in 1799. Its pro-American, cautiously optimistic view of the early American republican experiment was almost certainly meant to speak to the contemporary tense and uncertain political future of the

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<sup>6</sup> Philip A. Bruce, ed., *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 1 (Richmond: William Ellis Jones, 1894). William Ellis Jones, the printer who published Fisher's *Descendants*, printed numerous books and periodicals concerning Virginia history and local places of interest. He was, after all, selected by the Virginia Historical Society to publish their periodical *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* by 1894.

<sup>7</sup> Ambler family descendants were not the only ones interested in producing family genealogies. Karin Wulf illustrates the vital role genealogies played in early British North American culture in her article, "Bible, King, and Common Law: Genealogical Literacies and Family History Practices in British America," in *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Fall, 2012), pp. 467-502.

United States. By the end of the twentieth century, authors like Catherine Kerrison took on Carrington's collection, not in order to write family genealogies or unabashedly pro-U.S. narratives but to focus on histories of female intellectual thought and authorship in the early American republic.

At present, in a historiographical world where social, intellectual, and gender histories are fully respected, Carrington's multifaceted archival collection opens a window on methods of intellectual inheritance and female knowledge sharing in the early years of the American republic. Her miscellany, which originated as deeply personal correspondence, grew increasingly removed from her individual story until her words were used to represent and reflect contemporary American concerns.<sup>8</sup> This collection of letters, both originals and copies, was intended to instruct the youngest members of Carrington's family in their revolutionary past. The miscellany introduced them to the dangers the Ambler family witnessed during the American Revolution, as well as the sacrifices they made during the conflict. Carrington also used her miscellany to underscore the Ambler family's elevated social status in Virginia both during the American Revolution and into the Early American Republic.

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Most of what is known about the Jacquelin Ambler family stems from Carrington's miscellany. Carrington was born in 1765 to very prominent Virginian parents. Her father, Jacquelin Ambler, was the son of an English immigrant, Richard Ambler, who established himself quickly in Virginia society with homes in Jamestown

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<sup>8</sup> I here refer to her letter, which was copied verbatim, in the April 1938 edition of the *William and Mary Quarterly*. As mentioned above, I believe it was printed to express both eighteenth- and twentieth-century hopes and fears for the American national experiment. Carrington's voice was used optimistically to reflect the exceptionalism of the United States and its ability to withstand conflict in both centuries.

and Yorktown. Not unlike many other planters' sons with means, Jacquelin Ambler attended the College of William and Mary, and also the College of Philadelphia to further his private educational experience. Ambler inherited his father's mercantile business when he reached legal majority. He also received an exceedingly lucrative position as customs collector in Yorktown, a bustling port town in colonial Virginia.<sup>9</sup> Ambler's life was replete with service to the state. He served as a naval officer, a member of Council of State under Governor Thomas Jefferson, and State Treasurer (a position he held until his death). Ambler faced financial ruin during the American revolutionary conflict, as mercantile exchange was severely limited by the war. Moreover, he gave up his position as the collector of the king's customs due to his patriot political leanings. Even so, like many other indebted white planters of his day, Ambler maintained political power well after the end of the revolutionary war.

Jacquelin Ambler's rise to prominence in colonial Virginia society was no doubt due in part to his marriage to Rebecca Lewis Burwell Ambler. Rebecca Ambler was the daughter of Lewis Burwell and Mary Willis. Connected by blood or marriage to the wealthiest families in Virginia, her parents were extremely well off and politically powerful. Unfortunately, her parents had both died by the time she turned ten. She lived very comfortably with her aunt and uncle, who were both members of the wealthy Nicolas family. She also resided intermittently with other family members until she married Jacquelin. Rebecca Ambler is now known more popularly as Jefferson's

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<sup>9</sup> According to Hope M. Hockenberry, it remains unclear precisely why Richard Ambler received this post. She posits that he may have been Joseph Walker's deputy customs collector, and was granted the post upon his death in 1724. She states that he may have simply been seen as a capable and influential young man of the town as well. Hope M. Hockenberry, "The Amblers of Virginia: A Family's Rise to Prominence" (M.A. thesis, The College of William and Mary, 1973), 48-49.

infamous first love, “Belinda.”<sup>10</sup> She rejected his marriage proposal twice, in favor of less socially awkward beaux. Still, young Jefferson’s proposals demonstrate that Rebecca Ambler moved in Virginia’s highest social circles. According to Carrington, Rebecca Ambler was an extremely devout Anglican, as was Jacquelin. Carrington’s relationship with her mother was not always easy, however. Her letters hint that Rebecca Ambler suffered from what might now be diagnosed as bipolar disorder, not unlike Lewis Burwell before her and her daughter, Mary Willis Ambler (future Chief Justice John Marshall’s wife) after her. This strained Rebecca Ambler’s relationship with her children, as she often seemed distant and reserved. Nevertheless, by her own account, Carrington enjoyed a happy childhood undisturbed until the American Revolution.

As an adult, Carrington continued to surround and affiliate herself with politically important, usually male, individuals. She met John Marshall, a pivotal figure in the early American republic, as a very young woman. She described having first claim to him as a marriage partner; but, being unable to look past his less-than-dapper appearance, she passed him on to her sister Mary Willis Ambler. Despite Carrington’s lack of romantic interest in Marshall, they seem to have remained lifelong friends with a sibling-like relationship. Marshall even went so far as to pick her up and bring her home in a moment of despair and depression for Carrington when her first husband passed away. She also defended Marshall’s character and family background against attacks from legal rivals at the turn of the nineteenth century. She protected him politically as he had once protected her decades before.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Page, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1763. Microfilm MS 1952.1, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

In both her life choices and her literary ones, Carrington always presented herself as a woman who was deeply involved in the influential political and social networks of her day. She twice married well, selecting revolutionary soldiers who were also men of means to be her life partners. At twenty, she married William Brent in 1785. Brent was a Continental soldier from a wealthy gentry family. Carrington wrote that theirs was an extremely loving marriage and courtship, but it ended in his untimely death only a few months later. She waited seven years before marrying Colonel Edward Carrington, whose military résumé was far more prestigious than that of her first husband.<sup>11</sup> Edward Carrington served as Quartermaster General under Nathanael Greene, and commanded artillery during the battles of Hobkirk's Hill and Yorktown. He was personal friends with Polish General Kościuszko during the military conflict and well after its resolution, and Eliza stated that he was like a brother to George Washington. Col. Carrington also served as a delegate to the Continental Congress in 1780s, mayor of Richmond in 1809, and was a founding member of the Society of the Cincinnati. The inscription on his tomb, which Eliza Carrington wrote, points to what seems to have been a loving marriage between the two: "His tenderness to her who was the partner of his domestic comfort is remembered with mingled gratitude and love, and with pious veneration for his memory she hath caused this stone to be erected." Politically, socially, economically, and romantically, the Carringtons appear to have been well matched. Their marriage never produced any children, but their extended social and familial networks remained vitally important to them.

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Bowen-Sherman, *The Burying Ground at Old St. John's Church: A Concise History with Fifty Family Profiles and a Parish Burial Register* (Richmond: St. John's Episcopal Church, 2011), 11-12.

Although she had no children of her own, Carrington carefully maintained her place in her extensive family web, vigilantly cultivating close family ties intergenerationally. She took her sister Ann's daughter under her wing and remained a powerful force in extended family life. For generations, descendants referred to Janetta, Ann Fisher's daughter and Carrington's niece, as Carrington's adopted daughter.<sup>12</sup> Letters from the turn of the nineteenth century reveal that Janetta's frequent extended visits at the Carringtons' brought great joy to her doting aunt. Additionally, despite Janetta's continued contact with her biological mother, Janetta Harrison's firstborn was born at the Carringtons' years later. Whether Ann Fisher pitied her childless sister or Carrington empathized with her niece, who also appears to have had an emotionally distressed mother, is unclear, but all sources indicate that Carrington's relationship with Harrison was extremely close. Bearing these factors in mind, it is hardly surprising that when it came time for Carrington to entrust her collection of materials to the next generation, she ensured that they went to her beloved Janetta.

While Carrington's thoughts often turned to her family, both living and dead, she centered at least part of her public life on charity, and felt it her duty to ensure the moral fortitude of future generations of Americans. She crafted both her literary and lived memories carefully, expecting them to endure well beyond her lifetime. Carrington hated the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and feared that the disestablishment of religion would lead citizens away from virtuous and upstanding behavior. *Variety or the Vicissitudes of Life*, Carrington's never-completed novel that was loosely based on her "fallen" friend Rachel Warrington's unfortunate life, was intended to be a primer on

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<sup>12</sup> Notes from the 1883 transcription of Carrington's collection address this facet of Ambler family oral history.



appropriate and socially-acceptable behavior for young women of the time. She was also a founding member of the Female Humane Association of Richmond, whose mission statement read, “for general purposes of charity and benevolence, the relief and comfort of distressed females, and the maintenance and instruction of destitute white female children residing in the city of Richmond.”<sup>13</sup> Carrington’s obituary, written by an editor in the *Richmond Enquirer* described her thusly, “Her intelligent and cultivated mind; her generous heart; her active and diffusive charity, of which the Female Association furnishes one enduring memorial; and her practical piety made her one of Virginia’s most distinguished women.”<sup>14</sup> She left a living reputation of charity towards destitute and “wayward” women, albeit only white ones, and upstanding citizenship behind her when she died. Her very life, not only her archival collection, reflects a woman who fully understood what it meant to leave a legacy.

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Taking up her pen on her fifty-eighth birthday, Carrington sat down to write a letter to her sister Nancy (a nickname for Ann Fisher) that described her motivations for her work. While letter writing was by no means out of the ordinary for Carrington, this epistle was nonetheless unique. She wrote, “What an age, with such infirmities as I have had to contend with; Surely they are now past drawing to an end.”<sup>15</sup> This particular correspondence reflected a sense of fatality that was less explicit in Carrington’s previous letters. Confronted with malady and what she perceived as old age, she indulged her

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<sup>13</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws of the Female Humane Association of the City of Richmond* (Richmond: Shepard and Colin, 1843), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Judith Bowen-Sherman’s *The Burying Ground at Old St. John’s Church: A Concise History with Fifty Family Profiles and a Parish Burial Register* (Richmond: St. John’s Episcopal Church, 2011), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Eliza Jacquelin Ambler to [Ann] Nancy [Fisher], 11 March 1823. Elizabeth Jacquelin Ambler Papers, Manuscript DMS 54.5, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

“natural propensity for scribbling” once again to enlist her sister’s aid with a project that had “frequently beguiled a miserable day” for no less than twenty-seven years of her life. “It is my habit,” Carrington explained, “when time hangs heavy on my hands, which is often the case, to look over old manuscripts and letters that have been carefully put away - with a view to retrace a long and variegated life.”<sup>16</sup>

Judging solely by this quote, one might assume that Carrington saw herself as some sort of autobiographical archivist. In a way, she did. She informed Nancy that, “You will discover in [the manuscripts] what you have often seen: a strange mixture of good and bad that should induce you to peruse them with a sister’s eye, such as they are, unless I again change my mind, will at my death be yours.”<sup>17</sup> Carrington made her intended audience clear. This compilation appeared to be for her family’s eyes only. Then again, perchance it was for no one’s eyes at all. Carrington fretted that, “Now so many of [the letters] appear so frivolous that I am almost tempted to commit them to the flames. frequently have they been brought to verge of that device and at this moment I can scarcely forbear consigning them to everlasting oblivion.”<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, she dedicated numerous hours over the years to the completion of her collection, and could not see that time go to waste. On the other hand, Carrington described something akin to embarrassment after having looked over the entire compilation once again.

Despite this expression of ambivalence, it is clear that she intentionally preserved portions of her personal correspondence for familial posterity. After all, Carrington explicitly instructed her sister Nancy to share her manuscripts with her daughters, which demonstrates that Carrington meant for her private memories to be shared with two

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<sup>16</sup> Eliza Jacquelin Ambler to [Ann] Nancy [Fisher], 11 March 1823, Ambler Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

generations of Ambler family women. Several historians have argued that we can see the circulation of compilations like Carrington's amongst family and friends as a kind of publication in and of itself. As Catherine La Courreye Blecki wrote, in the case of Milcah Martha Moore's commonplace book, "Rather than being published in print, Moore's commonplace book was compiled for a relatively small audience of family and friends who were affectionate, literate, and tolerant of many points of view."<sup>19</sup>

Carrington intended her work to be circulated among her family members. She knew that her memories, whether personal or familial, would be shared through the correspondence literature she produced.

Carrington undertook creating her literary memory as a serious enterprise. The collection is comprised of twenty-three different manuscripts, including correspondence between Carrington and four other people. She wrote twenty of the documents herself. The manuscripts in the collection sporadically cover the forty-three-year span between 1780 and 1832, roughly the middle half of Carrington's lifetime. In this time, she reached the legal age of majority in the eighteenth century, fell in love twice, and was twice widowed. Carrington navigated major political, societal, and familial disruptions, all of which she outlined in her collection.

The first series of letters in Carrington's collection dates from her teenage years, and represents at least a portion of the correspondence between Carrington and her closest friend, Mildred Smith. These epistles from one young woman to another give valuable details about the Revolutionary War experience on the ground in Virginia. Four letters, dating from 1785 to 1802, were sent from Carrington to her friend Frances Caines

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<sup>19</sup> Catherine La Courreye Blecki and Karin A. Wulf, eds., *Milcah Martha Moore's Book: A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 59-60.

in England. These letters describe the negative repercussions of an extra-marital relationship between a mutual acquaintance and the son of the Comte de Rochambeau. They focus on contemporary conceptualizations of ideal femininity and morality, and their content differs markedly from the remainder of the collection.<sup>20</sup>

The eight remaining Carrington letters of the collection are addressed to Ann (Nancy) Fisher, Carrington's sister, and date from 1807 to 1823. These later letters contain genealogical information, Carrington's memories of life in colonial and revolutionary Virginia, and information about her methodology in compiling and researching for her collection. This last series contains most of the extant information pertaining to the formation of the collection itself.

In these letters to Nancy, Carrington informed her sister that she selected, edited, and annotated the letters in the collection, and even referenced other letters that should be read in tandem with those she included. Most of the letters are numbered in her hand. Numbering is such a simple act that we often lose sight of its true purposes: to demonstrate inclusion in a series, and to reflect an order in that series that may not be inherently apparent. Carrington's expressed ambivalence about her collection might threaten to overshadow the significance of this act, but from her numbering we can assume that this collection was not for her eyes only. She wanted someone else to be able to make sense of her collection, so she added her organizational system while she compiled the manuscripts to be included. This could be why she added, "Letters by

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<sup>20</sup> Catherine Kerrison writes extensively on morality and definitions of ideal womanhood found in Carrington's collection in her article, "By the Book: Eliza Ambler Brent Carrington and Conduct Literature in Late Eighteenth-Century Virginia," in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (Winter, 1997), pp. 2+27-52. Her subsequent book, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South*, Kerrison focuses principally on Carrington's moral concern in even greater detail, so I chose to focus on other aspects of the collection here.

copies-juvenile” on the back of her 1781 letter, for example. Carrington also occasionally included biographical information at the bottom of the page, clearly adding the information as it became available to her. “Lucy was only married a few months before to Mr Call,” and “inflammation of the kidneys” was added as a cause of her father’s death on one letter.<sup>21</sup> We find “Mathew killed at Crews House\*” linked to the “\*Battle of Germantown” on another.<sup>22</sup> At times, she utilized a footnote to send the reader somewhere else for more information, or to put her documents in context. This is why we find “\*See Thomas Marshall’s letter on the death of his Grand mother No 1” at the bottom of her own letter recounting her mother’s death.<sup>23</sup> Through numbering and annotating, Carrington systematized her history and organized a narrative thread out of chaos. Professional historians do the same thing, making it necessary to question Carrington’s ambivalence about the quality of her own work, and perhaps even assume that she wrote ambivalently to preserve a sense of false modesty. She took this collection more seriously than she let on in her letters. Carrington assumed little about her readers, giving full names and vital biographical information, at least what she had available, about almost all of her research subjects. As a budding historian/genealogist/archivist, she did much to make her work accessible to future generations.

Personal crises seem to have triggered Carrington’s natural propensity for historical analysis. Her most productive moments as a historian always followed times of individual distress. Unfortunately, the Revolutionary War in Virginia would not be the only great emotional and societal disturbance in Carrington’s life. The deaths of her husbands, father, and mother disrupted her familial network considerably, but also

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<sup>21</sup> Ambler to Caines, March 1795, Ambler Papers.

<sup>22</sup> Ambler to Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Ambler to Fisher, January 1<sup>st</sup> 1807, Ambler Papers.

inspired Carrington to record her personal recollections for posterity. Her first husband passed away only four short months after their marriage in 1785. At just twenty years old, Carrington was completely devastated by the loss. In a letter to Smith, she explained that, “The 15th of June, A day never to be forgotten, my adored B T was snatched from my arms. 48 hours of suffering, such as no pen can describe, did I witness, and then, oh then had to give him up forever. Think, oh think my friend what it is to part forever with those we fondly love.”<sup>24</sup>

Carrington suffered the obvious loss of her husband, but felt the loss of her kinship connections with his family just as keenly. She saw her emotional support network fall to pieces beneath her. Carrington’s socially accepted set of connections broke down for the first time. As a married woman in the eighteenth century, she was expected to assimilate into her husband’s family, a task that she did not mind in the least.<sup>25</sup> Her letters are filled with fond words and memories of her first husband’s family.

On October 10, 1796, she recalled:

The direful cause of this unexpected return [to Richmond] was full before me, and the reflection that only two short months had passed since I had been conducted by the most charming of men to meet his amiable Mother and Sisters and to be made happy amongst his relations with the prospect of every earthly happiness in view, suddenly deprived of all; returning widowed; helpless and forlorn.<sup>26</sup>

Carrington was clearly distressed and heartbroken at the loss of not only her new husband, but also her new family as a whole. She explained her need to reintegrate herself into the Ambler family narrative to her sister, Nancy, by stating, “I was suddenly

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<sup>24</sup> Ambler to Smith, July 10<sup>th</sup> 1785, Ambler Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*. Norton shed light on the complexities of familial relationships between married daughters and their parents. With the exception of caring for their parents in their old age, newlywed daughters were expected to assimilate fully into their husband’s families.

<sup>26</sup> Ambler to Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.

thrown back into my own family.”<sup>27</sup> Being “thrown back into” something implies that one was extricated from that very body in the first place. Carrington stopped feeling like a member in her natal family, as her husband’s family had replaced it. She was thrust again into the Ambler family at her husband’s very sudden demise, and her familial history and genealogical research reflected her eagerness to reintegrate herself into the very history she was writing.

By the 1790s, Carrington was explicitly elucidating that these genealogies stemmed from her desire to know herself through her family. “To know oneself has always been esteemed the perfection of human knowledge, it is a knowledge however, that few are scrupulously inclined to attain: being ever more solicitous to be known by others, than to know themselves.”<sup>28</sup> The social and emotional disruption of her first husband’s death “determined me to put by letters and papers that were interesting and at a future time to copy and number them so as to make them useful to my Young friends who would probably be induced to read them, perhaps for no other reason but because they had been so preserved.”<sup>29</sup> Carrington was inextricably linking her quest for self and the compilation of her collection. Her journeys of self-definition and familial integration began at the same moment. She no longer wanted to exist in the social limbo where she found herself as a young widow upon her husband’s death.

Servants’ pointed questions after her first husband’s passing alluded to Carrington’s transient place between families. As she recalled in October of 1796, a longtime family servant interrogated her, inquiring, “What will your Pa, & Ma think of your coming back so soon; -it is but a month or two since you were married and we all

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<sup>27</sup> Ambler to Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

thought you had gone to live a great way off. —What can make you go back to Richmond at this time of the year; did your Pa send Mr. M[arsha]ll for you.”<sup>30</sup> From these questions, one can see that Carrington’s arrival was not at all expected, nor was it socially acceptable. Setting perhaps an indecent curiosity aside for the moment, one can also see this servant’s inquiries as an attempt to understand Carrington’s precarious place within society in 1785. This servant assumed that her actions would greatly displease her parents and could not divine any potential reasons why she had returned to Richmond at all.

The questions the servant asked were ones Carrington was emotionally unprepared to answer. To escape her present, she retreated to her past. She hoped to use the past cathartically, researching her family to forget about the emotional trauma of her immediate personal loss. Carrington dug deeper and deeper into her genealogy, and implied that research was a coping mechanism for her.

Besides very palpable grief, architecture and physical artifacts played vital roles in triggering the nostalgia that spurred Carrington’s genealogical research. After John Marshall picked her up from her husband’s house to take her back to her family in Richmond, he and Carrington stopped at “the Cottage a retired spot in Hanover belonging to our kinsman John Ambler...at this little dwelling I had passed many of my happy youthful days, flattered and caressed by the dear relations that inhabited it.”<sup>31</sup> This cottage was incontrovertibly familiar to Carrington, as she had spent many delightful moments of childhood in those very halls, surrounded by those she loved. The familiarity

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<sup>30</sup> Ambler to Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



of the place spoke to her through her grief, pushing her further and further into her genealogical work.

I had recourse to an antiquated Cabinet which I knew contained old letters and Manuscripts of the family that had been accumulating for a half a cent[ury] and having upon former occasions felt great pleasure in looking over them I at least hoped to lose sight of myself in tracing the characters of those that ought to be interesting to me.<sup>32</sup>

Carrington knew where to look to find the information that she needed for her family narrative. After all, she had looked over the documents “upon former occasions.” She welcomed the distraction from her ever-present grieving that the task of examining the lives of others provided. Her ancestors were long gone, but they still furnished Carrington with very real comfort and support. Perhaps her research into the lives of others kept her from perseverating on the emotional discomfort of her own.

During her time at the cottage in 1785, she looked at manuscripts and heirloom objects as well. She analyzed portraits to determine her ancestors’ approximate arrival dates in Virginia, as well as their places within the social hierarchy of their day. Carrington depicted the scene of her research in the following manner: “Thus seating myself surrounded with the pictures of my venerable Great Grandfather, Mother and their numerous descendents, I proceeded to examine the Contents of the drawers that I might develope their Characters.”<sup>33</sup> In this rich passage, one can almost view the portraits themselves as actors who encouraged Carrington to proceed and read through the documents in the house. Images of her relatives were quite literally before her, and judging by her description, Carrington felt as though they were spurring her on. Her portrait analysis determined that, “The Costume of the Young Ladies and Gentlemen

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<sup>32</sup> Ambler to Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

bespoke more modern fashion” in some portraits than it did in others.<sup>34</sup> From the manuscripts, Carrington discovered that her Grandfather, Richard Ambler, was “an honest Yorkshire-man,” who married “the inheritor of the ancient seat at Jamestown.”<sup>35</sup> Her research, however, did not stop there. “Should I ever be in so scribbling a humor,” Carrington explained to her sister, “[I] will trace our own Parents for the sake of your children.”<sup>36</sup> She then went on to record the births and marriages of herself and her siblings. In a moment of personal tumult and distress, Carrington literally wrote herself into her family’s story, in an effort to avail herself of all of the support it provided.

Strong, independent, unmarried women had long been part of the Ambler family history, and Carrington underscores this fact for her miscellany’s readers. In what looks like an unimportant side note at first, Carrington noted that she “would have your daughters understand that the name of a woman may be transmitted to posterity tho’ she never change her State of Celibacy.”<sup>37</sup> Here, she was alluding to the family name “Jacquelin,” the name of a female ancestor passed down through her father’s first name, as well as her own middle name. “Aunt Jacquelin that we well remember who chose to take the title of Mrs at the age of fifty; this being the fashion of Spinsters in England at that period,- this name of Jacquelin, has been handed down from respect to her, on account of her many great virtues.”<sup>38</sup> For Eliza Jacquelin Ambler Brent Carrington, this particular name brought together her genealogy, her immediate family’s history, and her very personal present, all vital facets of her identity that she saw as aids to attaining that “perfection of human knowledge”—knowing oneself and one’s place in one’s family.

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<sup>34</sup> Ambler to Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

She wanted her work to serve “as a sort of Genealogical table that you may hand down to your daughters.”<sup>39</sup> Carrington saw genealogy as essential to understanding self-identity, and she believed that she had the time necessary to do the research. She claimed the role of family record-keeper for herself, although she believed it to be a selfish act, explaining, “There is nothing that self-love does not more or less govern us in.”<sup>40</sup> Carrington included oral history from her Aunt Martha, who was 93 when she died. Here again, we have a very clear case of familial history being inherited from female to female, and more specifically from aunt to niece, on down through the line. Carrington viewed her collection as a useful way to preserve her private memories as well as those of female family members and incorporate them into her family’s public memory. She believed her work passed along invaluable information about the family’s past that ought not remain unknown.

Although she focused on her family and its history, Carrington did not exclude herself from her family’s patriotic story. According to her collection, she lost and gained much during the American Revolution, and the conflict provided much of the intellectual framework for her miscellany. She demonstrated that she sacrificed and struggled just like everybody else, and her experience during the war was just as spontaneous and tumultuous as anyone else’s. Her collection, time and again, reflects that basic truth. Additionally, she expressed her political maturation for the first time in these letters, and her growing understanding that her political convictions came at a cost. She asked “What Sacrifice would not an American, a Virginian, at the earliest age have made for so desirable an end[?]” Despite her youth, she wrote that “the Word Liberty so sounding in

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<sup>39</sup> Ambler to Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

my ears seemed to convey an idea of every thing that was desireable on earth.”<sup>41</sup>

Carrington, like so many Americans, young and old, got caught up in the rhetoric and political turmoil of the times. However, despite the liberty sounding in her ears, she explicitly stated that she did not weather the revolution without hardship. She stated, “I was to see every present comfort abandoned...but in infancy the love of change is so predominant that we lose sight of consequences and are willing to relinquish present good for the sake of novelty.”<sup>42</sup> Carrington lost much during the war, but due to her youth, she was able to adapt to suit new situations into which she was placed. She regretted her disrupted education for the rest of her life, for example, but part of her contribution to the war effort involved continuing to improve her mind after the war’s end.

Carrington’s familiarity with personal sacrifice may explain the abounding reverence for not only war veterans, but also for her husband’s military connections, and those of the nation at large, found within her collection. She wrote that, during her trip to Washington D.C. and Mount Vernon with her second husband, “We returned to finish our visit to this revered mansion, - our headquarters while in the City (for I shall have not terms to us but what are military, hearing as I do a repetition from these dear old veterans of Battles, Fortifications, Marches and Counter marches, which are familiar as every day domestic topics to one connected as I have long been with soldiers and heroes).”<sup>43</sup> Here Carrington did not merely valorize military service with her word choice, but integrated herself into the rhetoric of valor. It was, of course, unacceptable for women to serve openly in the armed forces, but the best women of the day, women like Martha

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<sup>41</sup> Ambler to Fisher, March 1809, Ambler Papers.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

Washington, surrounded themselves with veterans who had served in the struggle for liberty. Both of her husbands served during the Revolution, and Carrington invited the comparison between herself and other war wives of the period (even though she was not married during the actual military conflict).<sup>44</sup>

Carrington placed memories from the past and hope for the future side by side in her work, and also juxtaposed personal relationships from the past with those in the future. Perhaps the best example of a new social relationship was that between Carrington and Washington's granddaughter, Eliza Parke Custis Lewis. According to Carrington, Washington's granddaughter was so "glad that you are her[e]," and promised "to retain you till this dreadful event [the impending birth of her first child] has passed."

Carrington "assured her nothing would give me more pleasure than to remain and to offer every friendly aid in my power."<sup>45</sup> She became acquainted with Lewis only a few days before, yet she was invited to participate in this extremely important familial event. True, the birthing room was not reserved exclusively for intimate relations of the expecting couple in the late eighteenth century as it is today, but it *was* reserved for the expectant mother's close friends, experienced women in the community, or loving relatives.

Carrington was justifiably excited to be asked to serve Lewis in this way, and she loved her new role as a guest at Mount Vernon. As she described, "My mornings are spent charmingly, alternately in the different chambers, first, an hour after breakfast with the Lady in the straw, dressing the pretty little stranger, who is the delight of the

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<sup>44</sup> Although both of Ambler's husbands served during the American Revolution, she was too young to be married to either of them during the actual conflict. The comparisons she fostered between herself and Martha Washington are made all the more interesting when one takes this fact into account.

<sup>45</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

Grandmama.”<sup>46</sup> Carrington apparently took to her new, albeit temporary, role in the Washington household quite well, and was honored to be integrated into their family so completely and so quickly.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Carrington continued this trend of integrating herself and her family fluidly into the national foundational story. Starting early in 1809, she focused instead on recording her private memories of the American revolutionary era in the moment, as opposed to compiling letters that *contained* her private memories as she had done in the past. The Revolutionary War disrupted Carrington’s education, which she deeply resented in retrospect. According to her, “The plan laid down for our education was entirely broken in upon by the A War which tho’ it was to involve my immediate family in poverty and perplexity of every kind was in the end to lay the foundation of independence and prosperity to my Country.”<sup>47</sup> Despite her parents’ best efforts, the war altered the Ambler children’s formal educational paths forever. She wrote:

Instead of morning Lessons we were to knit stockings, instead of embroidering to make up home spun garments, and in place of the musick of the Harpsechord to listen to the loud clanging trumpet, and never ceasing drum for in every direction that we travelled (and heaven knows we left but little of Virginia unexplored,) we hear nought but the din of War.<sup>48</sup>

Formal lessons literally became a thing of the past for this gentry family. “The din of War” long overtook the harpsichord as the prevailing sound in former colonists’ lives. In the chaos of the revolution in Virginia, what had been regular aspects of daily life, in

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<sup>46</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

<sup>47</sup> Ambler to Fisher, March 1809, Ambler Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Carrington's case her educational path, often had to give way to more immediately war efforts.

As it so happens, children like Carrington disliked this wartime alteration only retroactively. She noted that the end of "all hope of Education" was "by no means at this time distressing to me [though] was cause of much sorrow to our Parents." But she also commented that "how often since have I had cause to regret on that account particularly since my peculiar habits and other circumstances have induced me to turn my attention to instructing little folks."<sup>49</sup> Carrington's parents, Rebecca and Jacquelin Ambler, as members in the upper echelon of Virginia society, felt obligated to provide their children with the knowledge necessary to replicate their family's role in society in the succeeding generation. Without the proper education, they feared their children would become ineffective and unproductive members of society.<sup>50</sup> The children themselves did not mind in the least, of course, that is until later in their lives when they attempted to instruct "little folks." Carrington related to her sister that "I will occasionally fill up my time [teaching young children] and also transcribing old letters, which will perhaps amuse you at some time or other and is a sort of continuation" of her missing education.<sup>51</sup> Her compilation and preparation process for her collection helped to fill in what she thought of as her glaring educational deficiencies caused by the war. "I have often thought," she explained, "if in every family, one, who had leisure, would employ a portion of it in handing down remarkable and interesting circumstances; and be characters amongst

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<sup>49</sup> Ambler to Fisher, March 1809, Ambler Papers.

<sup>50</sup> My information on the fundamental importance of education for elite families stems primarily from Mary Kelley's *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Ambler to Fisher, March 1809, Ambler Papers.

themselves; a door, of improvement would be opened that might prove advantageous.”<sup>52</sup> Among other benefits, the very acts of annotating, transcribing, and numbering made Carrington feel something like a scholar, marking her as an extremely competent family historian if nothing else.

If Carrington’s work was, in fact, a miscellany meant to instruct future generations, then there is a way in which her circulating collection served as a living document of Ambler family history. Her annotations, additions, explanations and discoveries were meant to inform her family of their historical importance in *addition* to their contemporary significance in American life. Both of these goals are reflected in the entirety of Carrington’s collection. From the disruption of her education due to the conflict in Virginia, to her father’s service in the revolutionary government, she argued for her family’s continued significance despite the economic hardships war presented. She then went on to describe her use of genealogy as a cathartic coping mechanism after her first husband’s death, and a way to reintegrate herself into the Ambler family story. Legally a member of her first husband’s family, she forged a genealogical bridge back to her own after his death. Finally, Ambler strengthened connections between her family’s story and that of the United States by describing the societal and legal links with national persons of renown in the early American republic. Her sister’s marriage to John Marshall, her own marriage to Edward Carrington, and her visit to Mount Vernon all cemented her place, and that of her family, on an early nineteenth-century national stage. Whereas previous anecdotes in Carrington’s collection hinted at the Ambler’s political and national importance, these final letters make that participation undeniably clear. Starting with her accounts as a teenager during the revolution in Virginia, Carrington

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<sup>52</sup> Ambler to Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.



placed herself and her family in the highest societal and political circles of the fledgling United States.

For Carrington, her memories of the American Revolutionary War in Virginia appear to be some of the most important. The flight from Richmond and Yorktown aftermath letters of 1781 and 1782 in particular reflect a desire to educate young citizens of the new American republic about revolutionary hardships. These letters assert her involvement in the Revolutionary War in Virginia. They also imply her initial inclusion in the national narrative of the founding of the United States. Upon closer examination, it becomes obvious that Carrington intertwined this shared national distress and panic with intra-familial concern during this period in her life.

Memories of the American Revolution that Carrington chose to include were both generalized, or applicable to a national audience, and specific to her family's lived experience. The rhetoric Mildred Smith chose in her letters to Carrington could apply to almost any armed conflict, anywhere in the world, at any time, and it could certainly apply to other battlefields in the United States during and after the military struggle of the American Revolution. Aspects of her descriptions seem timeless and universally relevant to any militaristic situation. Many Americans witnessed the complete ruination of homes and familiar places and were forced to begin their lives anew. In integrating these scenes of destruction and juxtaposing them with semi-paradoxical hope for the future, Carrington partially obscured her family's superior social standing and expressed a national optimistic sentiment instead. She included this initial set of letters to ensure that her private memories of war be preserved. She did not want her readers to forget, however, that the simple fact that she possessed private memories of the war implicitly

included the Ambler and Smith families as members of that revered “founding generation.” These families, with whom Carrington was intimately acquainted, sacrificed and struggled just like countless other families nationwide. She saw these letters as a gateway through which she could place her family within the larger, national story of the Revolution.

Fear, especially combined with the act of running away from imminent danger, was a common national emotion of the period. Given Jacquelin Ambler’s position on Governor Thomas Jefferson’s council, the Amblers had moved to Richmond with the government in 1780. Unfortunately for them, and for all residents of Richmond, Brigadier General Benedict Arnold and his British regulars were soon to follow in 1781. They led raids throughout Virginia, the most terrifying of which, for Carrington at least, would have been their attempted capture of the revolutionary government. Jefferson, and more importantly her father, were placed in great danger, and fled the city. “Should it be confirmed that the British are really coming up James River,” Carrington commented, “my poor Mother will not continue a moment poor dear soul what sufferings are hers.”<sup>53</sup> Her mother’s appropriately feminine, sensible response to the threat of British presence was not uncommon across the nation. When that threat was realized, the Amblers, like so many American families “had too certain confirmation of the British having landed and being actually on their way to Town not a moment was to be lost and we were off in a twinkling.”<sup>54</sup> In response to this news, the Amblers fled as quickly as they could, and

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<sup>53</sup> Ambler to Smith, Richmond 1781, Ambler Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Carrington confirmed that they were not alone. “Such terror and confusion you have no idea of—Governor, counsel every body scampering.”<sup>55</sup>

When it came to the universal flight from Richmond, Carrington took the time to describe it in great detail. The whole scene unfolds before her reader’s eyes:

The Landlord out of breath reached the house saying that [Banastre] Tarlton and all his men had just passed him and catch the Governor before he could reach Charlottesville. what a panic seized us all, our best beloved Father had pursued the same route only a half hour before Charlottesville being the place appointed for public officers to repair to.<sup>56</sup>

She chronicled specific events to the extent possible, linking her family members, her father in this case, to important actors of the time. In the above quote, Carrington made a connection between Jefferson and her father Jacquelin through both common emotion and common action, asserting her family’s place in the national narrative of the revolutionary experience. Her utter fear of the unknown actions of this invading force is palpable even today.

Jacquelin Ambler’s dangerous public office justified his sleeping in a coach every night in order to facilitate escape, but Carrington described Jefferson’s near miss as “laughable.” She belittled Jefferson in order to rationalize her father’s behavior, portraying one man as ridiculous and the other as justifiable in his actions. Although Jacquelin Ambler held public office in revolutionary government, like Jefferson, he never served in the military. Perhaps his daughter attempted to raise his comportment to a more heroic standard by contrasting it with Jefferson’s. Carrington painted an *honorable* picture of her father’s involvement in the revolutionary crisis, forever preserving this

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<sup>55</sup> Ambler to Smith, Richmond 1781, Ambler Papers.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

positive image of character and disinterested public service within her family's national memory.

Carrington's transition from family to national history would seem sudden to the reader of her collection, but it was very natural to her. In describing her visit with Colonel Carrington to Mount Vernon in 1799, she mixed her second husband's kinship network and the optimistic rhetoric of the perceived success of the new United States. In order to establish her family's importance to the nation, Carrington first accentuated her husband's friendship with Washington as much as possible. She described their arrival at Mount Vernon in expressly familial terms:

We are experiencing every mark of hospitality and kindness, that the good old general's continued friendship to Col. C. could lead us to expect; his reception of my husband, was that of a Brother; he took us each by the hand, and with a warmth of expression not to be described, pressed mine, and told me that I had conferred a favor never to be forgotten, in bringing his old friend to see him.<sup>57</sup>

Carrington's choice of the word "Brother" was intentional. She could not effectively portray a closer kinship relationship to George Washington than a brotherly one, and this social proximity to the aging general was a facet of her life that she was sure to emphasize.

Once her husband's relationship with Washington was established, Carrington proceeded to revolutionary name-dropping:

Indeed one evening the General was so fascinating and drew my husband out into so many old stories relating to several campaigns where they have been much together, and had so many inquiries to make respecting their mutual friends, particularly Kosiusco and Pulaske who have always corresponded with Col. C---, whose characters afford great interest, that it was long after twelve before we separated.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

The colonel and the general stayed up late, shooting the breeze and reminiscing about times gone by. Swapping war stories is quite common among veterans, but by mentioning these two men in particular those stories took on a national and international flair. Thousands of men, not to mention a few women, served valiantly during the Revolutionary War, but few could claim to be personal friends with Washington, “Kosciusko and Pulaske.” Carrington’s husband was one of those few. Thus Colonel Carrington seemed a great social asset when Eliza Carrington tried to assert her own place in the story of the founding of the United States.

For Carrington, important dates for her family and crucial events during the revolutionary era could not be separated. They were completely linked. In her retrospective, memoir-esque letters, she added important family dates and places to the chronology of the Revolutionary War. For example, she recalled that, “Our dear little Lucy as she was justly called made her appearance in this bustling world just that day month after the declaration of Independence.”<sup>59</sup> Revolutionary places were as essential to her family’s history as revolutionary chronology. Carrington noted that, for example, “Newcastle, that enchanting Spot first memorable for its early resistance to British oppression and afterwards preeminently conspicuous in favouring plans for the final termination of the War it was by nature one of the most delightful Situations in America, at least my infantine imagination had painted it so.”<sup>60</sup> She referred to this place based on its revolutionary value, being one of the first places to resist British rule, but also based on its aesthetic and familial value. One cannot tell if Carrington found it to be “one of

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<sup>59</sup> Ambler to Fisher, 1809, Ambler Papers.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

the most delightful Situations in America” because of its beauty or because of its patriotism.

Complicating the Ambler family’s inclusion in the national narrative, Carrington’s memories surrounding a very special block of cheese were meant to allude to the Ambler family’s exceptional status within the royal government in Virginia. As Carrington recalled it:

[Lord Botetourt] sent down a Leaden Box containing a delicious double Gloster cheese to...our good Mother who had expressed a wish for double Gloster cheese some little time before your birth. this circumstance I either remember, (the Leaden box being so Novel a thing to me) or I have heard it mentioned so often in the family as to vouch for the truth of it, and to relate it as a proof of the Good Old Govenors Urbanity.<sup>61</sup>

Even though Botetourt was widely regarded as a benevolent emissary of the king, very few pregnant women in the colony of Virginia would receive cheese from the governor when she craved it, and in a novel lead box no less! Carrington wanted to place her family’s narrative within the larger national foundational narrative, but she also wanted to stress the exceptionalism of her family’s social standing, and of her father’s role in the king’s government during the colonial era.

In Carrington’s collection the Ambler family exceptionalism was meant to socially elevate all those it touched. In 1810, she wrote what she referred to as a character sketch of John Marshall in a letter to her sister. This small biography knit together her involvement and that of her family members in the history of the new United States more concretely than ever before. Carrington commenced this piece with an apologia of sorts, and declared, “Had I talents or the necessary information for writing the History of my country the period of my life mentioned in my last would afford an ample

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<sup>61</sup> Ambler to Fisher, 1809, Ambler Papers. How could a loyal Wisconsinite leave out a fabulous cheese vignette?

opportunity to distinguish myself but possessing neither the one or the other, it is impossible to give you an idea of the interesting state of the Colonies at that time.”<sup>62</sup>

Anecdotes about Washington babies being born, flights from Richmond, and blocks of cheese did not sound like “history” to Carrington. Today, one can recognize her papers as invaluable to both social and gender history of the early republic. Carrington, however, saw her collection as a method of assuring familial intellectual inheritance for generations to come, but that was the extent of her interpretation of her literary prowess.

That said, a portion of her family’s history surrounded a young man who played a vitally important role in the foundation of the American Republic. “What [John Marshall’s] superior mind and knowledge are capable of exhibiting; belongs to a more able biographer than myself; it is only his domestic character that I have attempted feebly to sketch,” Carrington asserted.<sup>63</sup> She went on to state that, “Instead of wearying you with my own trifling concerns and an account of my unimportant life I will occasionally give you a sketch of characters who have been interesting to me—but for the present will transcribe letters of old friends and select some of my own that may serve to amuse you on rainy days.”<sup>64</sup> What she accomplished in actuality was all *three* of those things. To Carrington, however, the character sketches were apparently very important, and few were more important than that of her brother-in-law, John Marshall.

According to her, John Marshall was “a very paragon.”<sup>65</sup> He was the oldest of fifteen children, and his younger siblings idolized him. He cared deeply for all of them. Most of the young girls in Yorktown greatly admired him too. As Carrington illustrated,

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<sup>62</sup> Ambler to Fisher, [1810] No. 12, Ambler Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

“The little circle of York were on tiptoe on his arrival; our girls particularly, were emulous who should be first introduced.”<sup>66</sup> No one took better notice of Marshall than her own sister, however, who, “with a glance developed his Character and understood how to appreciate it, while 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;...nevertheless how trivial now seem such objections.”<sup>67</sup> Even though Carrington honestly admitted that she could not see beyond Marshall’s unkempt appearance, she took great pride in the fact that her sister could see the virtuous young man underneath such imperfections.

Based on Carrington’s description of his personality, it seems as though the Amblers collectively reveled in Marshall’s every accomplishment. The whole family “learned with pleasure that he was determined to attend Law Studies in Williamsburg during his absence from his regiment of about three months,” and were pleased that “after obtaining a licence he rejoined his regiment gaining as much in that short time as would have employed many the same number of years.”<sup>68</sup> Marshall left his regiment for a time, but it was for his own intellectual improvement. The Amblers believed this was a completely legitimate reason to temporarily leave the army. After all, Marshall accomplished in three months what took most men years.

Marshall studied law, but the relatively few weeks he spent completing his studies at William and Mary was always a point of contention amongst his friends and enemies alike. Once he was appointed to the Supreme Court, many of his opponents felt he had dedicated too little time to his education to be in a position of such legal power.

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<sup>66</sup> Ambler to Fisher, [1810] No. 12, Ambler Papers.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



Carrington tackled that question by giving examples of his legal prowess, but she also wrote that “[He] has wisely shewn that nothing can so completely blunt the shaft of envy and malice as a life spent in Virtuous and Noble usefulness.”<sup>69</sup> Returning to the “paragon of virtue” idea, Carrington essentially stated that his servitude to others in the community placed him above reproach, even when his experience studying law came into question.

Perhaps Carrington defended Marshall so fervently because her sisterly relationship with Marshall reflected positively upon both of their places in Virginia society. Delineating and defining that relationship grew important to her in advocating her family’s supportive role in the new Republic. Carrington claimed that, “None ever knew him in that particular better than myself, -from the moment he loved my sister her became truly a Brother to me.”<sup>70</sup> But Eliza was not the only Ambler who built a strong relationship between herself and John Marshall. Carrington painted a picture of “The reciprocal interest which we have each felt our whole family became attached to him, and tho’ there was then no certainty of his becoming allied to us, we felt a love for him that can never cease.”<sup>71</sup> Marshall was a young upstart of a lawyer who was clearly going places in Virginia society, whereas the Amblers had been in Virginia for over a century by the Revolutionary War, and were related by blood and marriage to the wealthiest planter families in Virginia.<sup>72</sup> He needed a well-established family to respect both him and his work in the revolution. They needed a qualified groom for their daughter, and the patriotic and virtuous young Marshall seemed to fit the proverbial bill.

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<sup>69</sup> Ambler to Fisher, [1810] No. 12, Ambler Papers.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Hope M. Hockenberry, “The Amblers of Virginia: A Family’s Rise to Prominence” (M.A. thesis, The College of William and Mary, 1973).

When Carrington wrote this particular letter around 1810, Marshall had been Chief Justice of the Supreme Court for nearly a decade. Since John Marshall married Mary Willis Ambler, the Ambler family's participation in the new U.S. government vicariously continued until Marshall's death in 1835. Even though Carrington did not come anywhere close to marrying John Marshall herself, she still wanted future generations of Amblers to realize how "Much indeed do I owe him in every respect; and if I claim any consequence in life it may be ascribed to my early intimacy with so estimable a friend."<sup>73</sup> Marshall must have cared deeply for his sister-in-law as well. After all, it was he who picked her up and brought her home when her first husband passed away. Carrington asserted that John Marshall was fully assimilated into her family, even before he married her sister Mary. In claiming such an exemplary republican American as both her estimable friend and her brother, she very concretely crafted herself a place in both her family's history and the Ambler family's larger national story.

Carrington's timeless rhetoric speaks to the exceptionality of her family's connections, trials, and tribulations, but also to their universalities. Although it may seem like it was written retrospectively after the end of the military conflict, she wrote the following in 1781:

War in itself, however distant, is indeed terrible, but when brought to our very doors—When those we most love are personally engaged in it When our friends and neighbors are exposed to its ravages when we know assuredly that without sacrificing many dear to us our own lives, our country must remain Subject to British tyranny the reflection is indeed overwhelming.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ambler to Fisher, [1810] No. 12, Ambler Papers.

<sup>74</sup> Ambler to Smith, Richmond 1781, Ambler Papers.

Only the bit about remaining “Subject to British tyranny” seems notably historical in hindsight. Her emotions regarding the spoils of war were, and are, not unique and help to pull her memories of war into a trans-chronological and trans-national narrative. What Carrington called “the outrages of these Barbarians” demonstrates the same “us” versus “them” mentality that remains necessarily common in militaristic conflicts today.<sup>75</sup> Her use of the word “Barbarians” also speaks to the fact that she was acquainted with ancient history, and she drew from another time to help make sense of her own. Presentist perhaps, but even the use of this word reflects the fact that she was thinking like a professional historian.

Not unlike European civilians of yore, Carrington feared that her countrymen were powerless to stop “these Barbarians.” “But how dreadful,” she fretted, “the idea of an enemy passing thro’ such a country as ours committing enormities that fill the mind with horror and returning exultingly without meeting one impediment to discourage them.”<sup>76</sup> Carrington was not at all confident in the Continental Army’s military prowess in 1781, but she was nevertheless vocally resistant to British rule. She explained that, “A parcel of Miserable Malitia belonging to the neighborhood had called to give notice that the enemy were actually proceeding on their way thro the country but not one of them could say which route they had taken.”<sup>77</sup> Carrington included documents in her collection that typified her behavior as a Patriot, and reflected the national narrative at large. The British definitely represented “the other” in her eyes, complete with Tarleton cast as the penultimate villain, but she had next to no faith in her state’s governmental

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<sup>75</sup> Ambler to Smith, Richmond 1781, Ambler Papers.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

and militaristic capabilities. This ambivalence towards the efficacy of newly minted governmental agencies also exemplified national sentiments of the time.

In order to integrate her family fully into the founding narrative of the United States, Carrington also demonstrated how government officials' actions affected her family and their neighbors directly and equally. This time, she depicted the Ambler family on the same social plane as other Virginia residents of the 1770s. Looking back, for example, she remembered that in 1775 "We had recently been driven from [town] by Dunmores continuing to annoy Williamsburg and York in every possible way;" Carrington explained, "disagreeable as he had ever been to the inhabitants of those places he now became odious, and gladly did they see him depart from their Shores."<sup>78</sup> The "we" versus "they" rhetoric in this passage is very telling. She portrayed her family, the "we," as Dunmore's victims in the first portion of the excerpt and later utilized "they" to establish universal hatred for the last royal governor of Virginia. Here, the association between private/"we" memory and public/"they" is clear. Carrington placed her family firmly within both narratives.

Throughout her miscellany, positive images abound, once again reflecting cautious optimism on the American governmental experiment. In many ways, Carrington's friend Mildred Smith's letters describing the chaos of post-revolutionary Yorktown mimic the mythology of the phoenix. Smith first recounted the current state of the town when she wrote, "Indeed were you to be suddenly & unexpectedly set down in the very spot where you and I so often have played together, in that very garden where we gathered yr flowers or stole your Fathers choice fruit; you would not recognise a

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<sup>78</sup> Ambler to Fisher, 1809, Ambler Papers.

solitary Vestige of what it once was.”<sup>79</sup> Smith addressed and described the destruction that would be most jarring and personal for Carrington before anything else. The garden in question was of great importance to both adolescent girls, and its ruination symbolized the end of their former lifestyles and pastimes. Smith continued, “More than half our loved little Town is entirely destroyed and many of those elegant Edifices that to our youthful minds appeared magnificently beautiful are leveled with the dust.”<sup>80</sup> In her estimation, their “loved little Town” had suffered greatly from the hard-won battle fought in its environs. Many of the places Smith and Carrington knew and loved as children were completely annihilated by British, French, and American guns during the battle. However, Smith was certain that something new and glorious would rise out of the ashes. She recorded, “It is over; our individual sufferings are nothing—now we can reflect that the great end is accomplished—Peace is again restored and we may yet look forward to happy days.”<sup>81</sup>

Carrington nearly always tempered positive themes and imagery with neutral, or universally negative, anecdotes. On occasion, American political and military leaders were the source of the utmost embarrassment to the citizens they represented, and Carrington did not hesitate to poke fun at her less-than-fearless governmental officials. Thomas Jefferson bore the brunt of her critique, and she wrote of his escape from Richmond stating, “This is not more laughable then the accounts we have of \_\_\_\_\_ our illustrious G—r who they say took neither rest or food for men or horse till he reached C—rs Mountain.”<sup>82</sup> Like many of her fellow Virginians, Carrington admonished her

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<sup>79</sup> Smith to Ambler, Y[or]k 1782, Ambler Papers.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ambler to Smith, Richmond 1781, Ambler Papers.

Governor's actions outright. In their unequivocal hour of need, Jefferson quite literally left many of his constituents in the dust as he narrowly fled Richmond ahead of his would-be British captors. He left confusion and panic in his wake. Not surprisingly, Carrington explained away her father's equally cowardly comportment in the following manner, "The public office that he holds makes it absolutely necessary for him to run no risques of falling into the hands of the enemy. we therefore see him safely lodged in the old coach every night with faithful old Sam as his guard."<sup>83</sup>

In addition to carefully selected negative anecdotes, Carrington utilized overwhelmingly positive rhetoric to describe her experience in Washington D.C., which reflects national optimism in the American experiment in government at large. Whether she employed optimistic language to obscure her own anxieties about the new nation or not historians may never know, but one can still see that what Carrington described as Washington's granddaughter's excellent fecundity was symbolic of the nation's contemporary new growth: "Now when I see her the matron, for such her situation makes her appear, tho' she has only been ten moths a wife; lovely as nature could form her, improved in every female accomplishment...I seem actually transported in beholding her."<sup>84</sup> Carrington felt strongly that Washington's granddaughter was the perfect exemplar of republican femininity. She was beautiful, young, educated appropriately for her gender, married, and pregnant to boot. The fledgling United States was equally prepared to assume its place in the world as this young woman was to take on the mantle of republican motherhood, and her new role within her own family.

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<sup>83</sup> Ambler to Smith, Richmond 1781, Ambler Papers.

<sup>84</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

Carrington described both the house at Mount Vernon and the city of Washington using equally idyllic terms. She wrote, “It is really an enjoyment to be here and to witness the tranquil happiness that reigns throughout the house.”<sup>85</sup> The beauty and tranquility of Mount Vernon was often extrapolated to extend to the beauty and tranquility of the nation as a whole. In many important ways, Mount Vernon, home of one of the greatest patriots in the United States, served as a national shrine to liberty and the success of the nation in general.<sup>86</sup> Washington’s retirement home, and his retirement more generally mirrored the lives of veterans across the country. Carrington reflected that, “It is wonderful after a life spent as these good people have necessarily spent theirs, to see them in retirement assume domestic manners that prevail in our country, when but a year since they were forced to forego all these innocent delights which are so congenial to their years and tastes, to sacrifice to the parade of the drawing room and levee.”<sup>87</sup> According to her rhetoric, after years of disinterested servitude, Continental veterans, and the Washington family most especially, had earned the right to “assume domestic manners” and “innocent delights” they had been denied for so many years during the war. For Carrington, the Washingtons’ story echoed that of the entire nation, again speaking to the universality the experiences she described. Although she only explicitly discussed the Washington family’s story, she extended that narrative to include all soldiers post-conflict who were returning to their plows.

Carrington invited her readers to see Washington D.C. as a city of chance encounters and happy reunions with loved ones, a place of new beginnings and

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<sup>85</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

<sup>86</sup> Much of my information on the importance of Mount Vernon in the American mind comes from Scott Casper’s *Sarah Johnson’s Mount Vernon: The Forgotten History of an American Shrine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

reconnections. She worked hard to foster her own contacts, as well as those of her husband, both social and geographical, in D.C. She was not just along for the ride. Carrington had some very personal connections in this uniquely American city, and an equally important role in the American story. For example, she ran into members of her first husband's family in the nation's new capital. She exclaimed:

Oh! how delightful after a separation of so many years from the sister of my ever to be remembered Col. B—t (and in that separation to have found other connections, which might, or might not, have been agreeable to that much loved family) to be received by them with open arms, and to experience all that tenderness which they were wont to show me while the wife and widow of their idolized Brother.<sup>88</sup>

Fourteen years after her first husband's death, Carrington and her former in-laws appeared thrilled to find each other again in the national capital. It also confirmed that she was a woman whose family contacts were significant, even when they had not been maintained for years.

Carrington's *mélange* of old and new experiences in the capital is a concept that is pervasive throughout the lengthy epistle detailing her visit. She explained that, "I found myself while in Washington in a new world tho' in the self same spot where a few years before I felt quite at home. On those very farms where dwelt my dear old friends – the Youngs, the Carrols, etc., etc., did I see the stately edifices of the Capitol, President's House, etc., etc., all appearing to me like enchantment."<sup>89</sup> She felt as though she had one foot in the old geography she knew, and other in the youthful city of 1799, bursting with potential.<sup>90</sup> The reader is left with the impression that the familiar newness of the city

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<sup>88</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> In a letter from Carrington to Bishop John Carroll of Maryland, she referred to him as her "dear and respected Uncle." While she noted that the familial connection came from her husband, her self-identification as a friend and relative to the powerful Carroll family speaks volumes about her place in



gave it its charm in Carrington's eyes, as she wrote, "Avenues and Streets intersecting each other which I drove thro' recall recollections of the different places that were natural to me as my own...It is absolutely magic."<sup>91</sup> Here again, one sees the national story poking through her narrative. Just twelve years after the formation of the new republic, Americans as a people were similarly adjusting to their new-fangled country. For many, livelihoods, social standing, even male representatives elected to serve in government bodies barely changed, if they changed at all. And yet, there was something very exciting about this new governmental structure. Carrington's description of D.C. during this early national period utilized much of the same rhetoric as the pamphlets extolling hope in the new direction of the independent United States. Her individual hopes and fears for the new country reflected those of the nation writ large, as they so often did.

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Carrington's miscellany is a family archive, a memoir, a genealogy, a primer and a history of the American Revolution. She had the time, willpower, and desire to compile the collection of documents in her past. This endeavor was partially an academic exercise for herself, but it was also a method of self-preservation for future Ambler family descendants. In one of the powerfully timeless passages of this collection, Carrington wrote:

After asking ourselves who we are, and what we are, it naturally arises from whom we are; and here too, self-love is to be either flattered or mortified. Particularly when Years encrease, we love to trace our Genealogy, and are eager to gratify the Young enquirer, who with open

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society during the early republic. This letter can be found in volume 22 of *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia, 1911), pp. 144. For more on the Carroll family of Maryland, please see Ronald Hoffman's magisterial collaboration with Sally D. Mason entitled *Princes of Ireland, Planters of Maryland: A Carroll Saga, 1500-1782* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2000).

<sup>91</sup> Ambler to Fisher, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1799, Ambler Papers.

ears and mouth will attentively listen to hear what Grand pa and Grand Ma said, where they lived, and from whence they came.<sup>92</sup>

From this passage, we can see that Carrington attempted to define “from whom we are” for the generations of young Ambler descendants to come. The blessing of grandchildren would never be hers, so she left her miscellany for posterity, organized in such a way so that it would be clear to any who attempted to peruse it.

In the 1796 letter quoted above, Carrington also alluded to what she called “self-love,” which could be either a good or bad sentiment. One can assume that the self-love that is to be flattered encompassed precisely the kind of work she accomplished in her collection. She respected the Ambler family story enough to preserve her memories for future Ambler children who may not have been able to ask their grandparents about the details of their and their ancestors’ lives. Carrington’s extended family seems to have appreciated the gesture. The names “Elizabeth,” “Eliza Jacquelin,” “Betty Ambler,” and “Edward Carrington” continue down the family line well into the nineteenth century. These clearly honorific naming practices speak to a lasting familial bond that continued for over a century after Carrington’s death, as well as an in-depth knowledge of family ancestors that lasted equally as long. Ambler family descendants clearly knew their history, and appreciated where it came from.

Most researchers reading Carrington’s collection today are not Ambler descendants, and it is impossible to know how she would feel about this sort of audience. We cannot decipher which stories and details she would have preferred to keep within the confines of her family’s history, but there can be little doubt that she was proud of her family’s contributions to the development of the nation. This meticulously compiled

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<sup>92</sup> Ambler to Ann Ambler Fisher, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1796, Ambler Papers.

collection is a testament to Carrington's perspicacious quest to instruct her family about their experiences during the American Revolution, their status in Virginia politics and society during that conflict and in the Early American Republic, and the universality of their hopes and fears for the American Experiment. It also informs historians of today that family archives, memoirs, genealogies, and family histories were all deeply interrelated for Carrington, and may have been just as entangled for other female memory keepers of the period. Letters need not be seen simply as primary sources for history writing. In fact, they can be, and often were, valid histories in and of themselves. Despite her ambivalence about her life story, historians today can be grateful that Carrington left a record of her "long and variegated life."

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