



# Principle Approach® Education

## FIRST IN WAR, FIRST IN PEACE, FIRST IN THE HEART OF HIS GRANDDAUGHTER: GEORGE WASHINGTON & NELLY CUSTIS

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Eleanor Parke Custis, affectionately known as Nelly, was adopted by George Washington soon after her father, Martha Washington's son by her first marriage, died. Washington wrote in his will that "it has always been my intention, since my expectation of having Issue has ceased, to consider the Grand children of my wife in the same light as I do my own relations, and to act a friendly part by them; more especially by the two whom we have reared from their earliest infancy."<sup>1</sup>

"Nelly and her brother lived with the Washingtons at Mount Vernon and experienced from him parental care and affection, and the formation of their minds and manners was one of the dearest objects of his attention."<sup>2</sup> When Nelly was ten years old, her Grandpapa, George Washington, became president of the United States. She lived with him and Martha and her brother in the capital cities of New York and Philadelphia.

"Through Nelly's eyes one sees her 'Grandpapa' in a human light as a caring father and attentive guardian, rather than as an icon inscribed with the words 'Father of His Country.'"<sup>3</sup> As Nelly was growing up, Washington was concerned about his granddaughter's education. Later, he gave her advice on courtship and did what was in his power to assure her happiness after marriage.

Nelly, along with her brother, was educated at home in the octagonal schoolhouse in the corner of the garden wall. Washington was careful in his hiring of a tutor for the children. He enlisted the aid of Noah Webster to find a tutor that had to be "a Master of composition, and good Accomptant (accountant): to answer his pupils, he must be a classical scholar, and capable of teaching the French language grammatically; the more universal his knowledge is, the better."<sup>4</sup> Nelly was an enthusiastic student, learning reading, penmanship, grammar, speech, history, and French. She also loved reciting poetry. In New York and Philadelphia, she went to private schools or had master teachers instruct her in foreign languages, music, dance, and drawing.



### WASHINGTON'S LAST BIRTHDAY by Henry A. Ogden, 1899

Courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. Used by permission.

“Martha’s child’s child grew up to walk in the virtues she had learned from her grandmother. Nelly inherited from her grandmama her Bible, her prayers, her instruction, and her example.”

(Barbara Rose’s article, p. 21)

“[Nelly] revered her Grandpapa, whom she also referred to as ‘the General,’ as though there was only one in America. In return, he found his beautiful Nelly a constant joy.”

“[George and Martha were Nelly’s] beloved parents whom I loved with so much devotion, to whose unceasing tenderness I was indebted for every good I possessed.”

(from Patricia Brady, ed., *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly: the Letters of Eleanor Park Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794–1851*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991, 3, 17.)



Nelly was a “spirited” girl who loved to engage in political conversations with opinions she learned at her grandfather’s knee. She would entertain congressmen and foreign diplomats on the harpsichord and assist her Grandmother Martha in social functions. Guests delighted in her charm and beauty. Nelly “revered her Grand-papa, whom she also referred to as ‘the General,’ as though there was only one in America. In return, he found his beautiful Nelly a constant joy.”<sup>5</sup>

As his adopted granddaughter, “Washington had watched over her with parental solicitude. Tradition says that he frequently inculcated the most valuable precepts when talking seriously with her; and in his most playful mood would give her words of wisdom that took root in her mind and heart.”<sup>6</sup> The following letter exhibits his concern for Nelly’s penmanship and then instructs her in courtship and keeping her affections. Truly, Washington was a protector of her heart.

Philadelphia, January 16, 1795  
(or March 21, 1796)

Your letter, . . . is written correctly and in fair characters, which is an evidence that you command, when you please, a fair hand. Possessed of these advantages, it will be your own fault if you do not avail yourself of them; and, attention being paid to the choice of your subjects, you can have nothing to fear from the malignancy of criticism, as your ideas are lively, and your descriptions agreeable. Let me touch a little now, on your Georgetown ball; and happy, thrice happy, for the fair who were assembled on the occasion, that there was a man to spare; for had there been seventy-nine ladies and only seventy-eight gentlemen, there might, in the course of the evening, have been some disorder among the caps, notwithstanding the apathy which *one* of the company entertains for the ‘youth’ of the present day, and her determination “*never* to give herself a moment’s uneasiness on account of any of them.” A hint here: men and women feel the same inclinations towards each other *now* that they always have done, and which they will continue to do until there is a new order of things; and *you*, as others have done, may find, perhaps, that the passions of your sex are easier raised than allayed. Do not, therefore, boast too soon nor too strongly of your insensibility to, or resistance of, its powers. In the composition of the human frame there is a good deal of inflammable matter; however dormant it may be for a time, and like an intimate acquaintance of yours, when the torch is put to it, *that* which is *within you* may burst into a blaze; for which reason, and especially, too, as I have entered upon the chapter of advises, I will read you a lecture drawn from this text.

Love is said to be an involuntary passion, and it is therefore contended that it cannot be resisted. This is true in part only; for, like all things else, when nourished and supplied plentifully with aliment, it is rapid in its progress; but let these be withdrawn, and it may be stifled in its birth, or much stunted in its growth. For example, a woman (the same with the other sex) all beautiful and accomplished, will, while her hand & heart are undisposed of, turn the heads and set the circle in which she moves on fire. Let her marry, and what



is the consequence? The madness *ceases* and all is quiet again. Why? Not because there is any diminution in the charms of the lady, but because there is an end of hope. Hence it follows that love may and therefore that it ought to be under the guidance of reason; for although we cannot avoid *first* impressions, we may assuredly place them under guard: and my motives in treating on this subject are to show you, while you remain Eleanor Parke Custis, spinster, and retain the resolution to love with moderation, the propriety of adhering to the latter resolution, at least until you have secured your game, and the way by which it is to be accomplished.

When the fire is beginning to kindle, and your heart growing warm, propound these questions to it: “Who is the invader? Have I competent knowledge of him? Is he a man of good character? A man of sense?” For, be assured, a sensible woman can never be happy with a fool. “What has been his walk in life? Is he a gambler, a spendthrift, or drunkard? Is his fortune sufficient to maintain me in the manner I have been accustomed to live, and my sisters do live, and is he one to whom my friends can have no reasonable objection?” If these interrogatories can be satisfactorily answered, there will remain but one more to be asked; that, however, is an important one. “Have I sufficient ground to conclude that his affections are enjoyed by me?” Without this, the heart of sensibility will struggle against a passion that is not reciprocated—delicacy, custom, or call it by what epithet you will, having precluded all advances on your part. The declaration, without the *most indirect* invitation on yours, must proceed from the man, to render it permanent and valuable; and nothing short of good sense and an easy, unaffected conduct, can draw the line between prudery and coquetry. It would be no great departure from truth to say that it rarely happens otherwise than that a thorough-paced coquette dies in celibacy, as a punishment for her attempts to mislead others, by encouraging looks, words, or actions, given for no other purpose than to draw men on to make overtures, that they may be rejected.

. . . best regards are presented to your Mama, Dr. Stuart & family; and every blessing—among which a good husband, when you want and deserve one—is bestowed on you by yours, affectionately.

George Washington <sup>7</sup>

His love for his two adopted children was very strong, and he watched over their mental and moral development with great solicitude. <sup>8</sup>

Nelly had many suitors, but her affection was first and foremost for her grandparents. Nelly once confided in her girlfriend, Elizabeth, that her husband had to be a man that she would love with all her heart rather than just romantically. It seems that she had taken to heart the wise counsel of her grandfather with regard to courtship.



In 1797, Major Lawrence Lewis, Washington's nephew and personal secretary and widower, began a relationship with Nelly. Though Washington claimed to know nothing of the possible union, Nelly had shared with him her heart and all the love letters she had received from Lawrence. Her only regret was the separation marriage would necessitate with her "Beloved Grandparents who have been everything to me hitherto, and this dear spot (Mount Vernon)—which has been my constant Home."<sup>9</sup> On February 22, 1799, Washington's sixty-seventh birthday, Grandpapa gave Nelly away in marriage to Lawrence Lewis. She wore a white lace veil, the first in the tradition of brides.

Always looking after Nelly's welfare, Washington gave the newlyweds two thousand acres of Mount Vernon land and for "just rent, the mill, and distillery."

Nelly gave birth to their first child less than three weeks before George Washington died, December 14, 1799. Because she was recovering from childbirth, Nelly was not at his side. She wrote to a friend that "the loss we have sustained is irreparable."<sup>10</sup> "But [Washington] died knowing that his careful plans for his granddaughter's future happiness were well on the way to fulfillment."<sup>11</sup>

Years later, Nelly wrote to historian Jared Sparks a testimonial of her beloved Grandpapa's faith.

He always rose before the sun, and remained in his library until called for breakfast. I never witnessed his private devotions. I never inquired about them. I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt his firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those who act or pray, "that they may be seen of men." He communed with his God in secret . . . Is it necessary that any one should certify, "General Washington avowed himself to me a believer in Christianity?" As well may we question his patriotism, his heroic, disinterested devotion to his country. His motives were, "*Deeds, Not Words;*" and, "*For God and My Country.*"<sup>12</sup>

Few knew Washington as his precious Nelly did. She had always found him a special confidant and loved her Grandpapa with a rare intimacy.

*First in War, First in Peace,  
First in the Heart of his Granddaughter.*



- <sup>1</sup> John Frederick Schroeder, *Maxims of Washington*. Mount Vernon, VA: The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1974, 235.
- <sup>2</sup> Verna M. Hall, *George Washington: The Character and Influence of One Man*. San Francisco, CA: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1999, 47.
- <sup>3</sup> David L. Ribblett, *Nelly Custis: Child of Mount Vernon*. Mount Vernon, VA: The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1993, iv.
- <sup>4</sup> John C. Fitzpatrick, ed, *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. 34, October 11, 1794–March 29, 1796. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1938, 311.
- <sup>5</sup> Patricia Brady, ed., *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794–1851*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991, 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Benson J. Lossing, *Washington and the American Republic*, Vol. III, Part II. Philadelphia, PA: George Barrie & Sons, Publishers, 1870, 484.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 484–486.
- <sup>8</sup> Benson J. Lossing, *The Home of Washington*. Hartford, CT: A. S. Hale & Company, 1870, 280.
- <sup>9</sup> Ribblett, 45.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>12</sup> Jared Sparks, *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. xii. Boston, MA American Stationers' Company, 1837, 405–407.