



Courtesy of National Park Service (Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial)
Markie Williams as a 12-year-old, painted by her father, Captain William G. Williams.

Our Little Sanctuary in the Woods

Spiritual Life at Arlington Chapel

BY KAREN L. BYRNE

In October 1853, Martha Custis Williams, “Markie” as she was known, the great great granddaughter of Martha Washington, underwent a moving religious experience. After attending church on October 30, she described her feelings in her journal: “Suddenly, I felt that my soul might be more benefited there, than in the gorgeous edifices of Paris. I could but compare the probable amount of good done in this very humble room to that effected in the . . . exquisite church of St. Genevieve.” The “humble room” was the plantation chapel that belonged to Miss Williams’ great uncle, George Washington Parke Custis.¹

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Arlington’s first public worship services were held on the Arlington estate. Religion was a cornerstone of daily life in the Custis household. Mr. Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington and foster son of the president, settled on his estate in 1802 and began construction of his new home that same year. In 1804, he married Mary Lee Fitzhugh, who, at the age of sixteen, became the mistress of Arlington House. Her kinsman, Reverend William Meade, once remarked, “For benevolence, unaffected piety, and disinterested zeal in every good work, I never knew her superior.” Mrs. Custis, a devout Episcopalian, initiated the practice of holding family prayers twice each day at Arlington. Years later, her daughter, Mrs. Robert E. Lee, would continue that tradition. On Sundays, the family attended services at Christ Church in Alexandria. A visitor to the plantation once observed, “The command to keep holy this day of rest is kept at Arlington with a grace that makes it a sweet and peaceful day without austerity.”²

It is quite likely that Mrs. Custis’ religious convictions ultimately led to the creation of the chapel at Arlington. Molly Custis believed that every individual should have the ability to read the Scriptures. She also questioned the morality of the institution of slavery and was one of the earliest supporters of the American Colonization Society. Later in life, Mary Custis Lee noted the importance of her mother’s convictions: “My mother devoted herself to the religious culture of the slaves. Her life was devoted to this work, with the hope of preparing them for freedom. Through her influence, my father left them all free in five years from his death.” To begin the long “preparation” process, Mrs. Custis persuaded her husband to pro-

vide a rudimentary education for his large slave force at Arlington. Custis decided that a proper school was in order.³

The construction date of the plantation schoolhouse remains a mystery, but as early as 1805 Custis offered to give a twenty-five acre farm to anyone who would establish a school on his property to educate "a certain number of children on behalf of the proprietor." The schoolhouse was erected but Custis never received any response to his offer. Mrs. Custis ultimately assumed responsibility for the slaves' instruction. It was probably her suggestion that the vacant structure might be put to good use as a house of worship that resulted in the school's conversion to a chapel. Ironically, there is little documentation on the chapel during the years of Mrs. Custis' lifetime. From the numerous descriptions of her deep faith, it seems certain that she would have attended services. Years later, her granddaughters and niece, Martha Custis Williams, would provide a detailed portrait of the little chapel and its importance at Arlington.⁴

The chapel was located on the western section of the estate, approximately one mile from Arlington House. The most direct route to the chapel was a path that led through the Arlington forest to the south of the house. During periods of inclement weather, the Custises reached "the station" by means of a longer route that ran past the slave quarters on the eastern section of the estate. Services were conducted on Sunday evenings by students from the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria. According to Agnes Lee, the little congregation consisted "chiefly of the servants." The public, however, was welcome to attend services. Markie Williams recalled one Sunday in which "an old white man, who sat up very primly, and two little white girls" were in attendance. Another regular worshiper was an elderly woman who often broke into lamentation, much to Markie's displeasure.⁵

While Markie and her great uncle attended the chapel most habitually, other family members also worshipped there on a regular basis. Agnes and Annie Lee both recorded their memories of the little church. After they attended chapel with the slaves, the two girls conducted a Sunday school for the slave children in the evening. Young Mildred Lee also visited with her older sisters who supervised her during services. Mrs. Lee, who was always most interested in religious matters, took part in the Sunday services when her health permitted. Robert E. Lee, Jr. often rode his white pony Santa Ana to the chapel. Among the Arlington slaves, Margaret Taylor attended the little church most regularly. She and other slaves often walked to and from the chapel with members of the Custis family. Markie Williams once noted that she went to church even when she did not feel well in the hopes of motivating the slaves to attend.⁶

The level of devotion and attentiveness seemed to vary among those in attendance. When Blanche Berard attended the chapel during her visit to Arlington in 1856, she was impressed by the "servants of all ages so attentive." On another occasion, Markie Williams noted that the "large colored congregation" waited more than an hour for the seminarian to arrive at the chapel. Others who attended services displayed less discipline. In 1903, Bishop Henry C. Potter recalled his experiences as a young seminary student at Arlington some fifty years earlier: "Mr. Custis, who was an old man, often went to sleep when I spoke in Arlington chapel," he remembered. Bishop Potter attributed Custis' soporific propensities to the quality of his preaching. In contrast, "his son-in-law Colonel Robert E. Lee was always singularly alert and reverent in his bearing," Potter observed.⁷

In November 1855, Markie Williams described a particularly memorable trip to the "little tabernacle in the woods." Late in the afternoon, Mr. Custis announced that it was time to leave for church. At that moment, Perry Parks, one of the domestic slaves, entered the house and announced, "Master, your woods are on fire." To Markie's great amazement, Mr. Custis "perfectly unmoved and in his slow way" ordered Perry to alert the field slaves and tell them to extinguish the fire. Afterward, Perry was to return to the house to saddle a horse for Markie to ride to church. With that, Mr. Custis calmly set out on foot for the chapel!⁸

In addition to the regular Sunday services, the chapel also provided a setting in which the sacraments could be administered. Agnes Lee and Markie Williams both recalled receiving communion. Agnes, who devoted much of her journal to religious matters, found the communion service particularly impressive. In 1854, Markie voiced concern that she should have experienced more joy and inner peace after receiving the "holy privalige [sic] of the Blessed Sacrament of the Lord's Supper." She faced an even greater spiritual dilemma when seminarian Henry Potter asked her to serve as the baptismal sponsor for a neighbor's child. Markie seriously questioned her own spiritual strength and considered the "great duty" for some time before she finally consented. On the appointed day, the "Baptismal Bowl" and white anemones were taken to the chapel in preparation for the sacrament. Potter baptized William Alexander Ellet on May 10, 1857.⁹

Henry Potter and his brother seminarians sometimes came under great scrutiny from members of the Custis and Lee families. The affable Mr. Custis believed that the theological students had wrought so much good at the chapel that he even considered enlarging the structure. Other family members were not so easily impressed. Although Markie Williams was

fond of Henry Potter, she criticized his preaching on more than one occasion. She once informed him that his sermon was inappropriate for the slaves as it “put the hay too high for the sheep of his flock.” The following Sunday she observed that the “trough is still not quite as accessible as it might be” and further complained that his discourse flowed on like the current of a river with little inflection. Her harshest

criticism was reserved for Mr. Wiley, the first student to conduct services after Mr. Custis’ death. She and Mary Lee, the eldest of the four Lee girls, walked home “criticising [sic] the efforts of the young Divine.” His theme was unintelligible, his ideas flew out in all directions “like a fire-work-wheel,” and he wearied his audience with his long sermon.¹⁰

By the time of Mr. Custis’ death in October 1857, the chapel ceased to occupy as prominent a role in the Lee family’s routine. Some members of the family had already moved away from the estate, and the Civil War would force the remaining Lees from their home in the spring of 1861. In May of that year, thousands of Federal troops occupied the Custis estate. Over the course of the war, the Arlington landscape was irrevocably changed. Soldiers cut down most of the forest to build roads and fortifications, and, in 1864, the graves of war dead gradually replaced many of the old plantation landmarks. It appears that the Arlington chapel became yet another casualty of the Civil War.

Although no trace of the plantation chapel remains, its spirit is alive and well in its successor church, Trinity Episcopal. Today, Trinity carries on the tradition of a diverse congregation actively engaged in many forms of ministry. Meals on Wheels, Arlington Street Peoples Network, and El Hogar de Amor y Esperanza, a home for destitute boys, are but a few of Trinity’s community outreach activities. Trinity is located on Columbia Pike, not far from the location of the original chapel. Today, busy highways, businesses, and apartment buildings have replaced the serene woods that sheltered the chapel so long ago. A historical plaque near the Sheraton hotel on South Orme Street marks the approximate location of the Arlington “meeting house.” The marker is the only reminder of the once thriving house of worship where Robert E. Lee sat reverent and alert, Markie Will-

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iams critiqued the preaching of young seminarians, Agnes Lee reflected on the meaning of communion, and George Washington Parke Custis gently nodded off to sleep.¹¹

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Endnotes

¹ *Journal of Martha Custis Williams*, October 30, 1853, Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial Archives. Many of the journal entries date from 1853-1857. Martha Williams lived at Arlington House during most of this period. The journals were transcribed by Anne Webb.

² Murray Nelligan, *Arlington House: The Story of the Robert E. Lee Memorial* (Burke, VA: Chatelaine Press, 2001), p. 115; William Meade, *Old Churches and Families of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1857), p. 193.

³ *Journal of Martha Custis Williams*, November 2, 1853; Laura C. Holloway, *The Ladies of the White House* (Philadelphia: Bradley and Co., 1881), p. 58. Markie's journal lends further support to Mrs. Lee's assertion that her mother was the driving force for the education of the Custis slaves. Her entry for November 2, 1853 includes a conversation in which Custis stated "teaching the colored children is not according to my notions, but it was my poor wife's plans. I wish things to go on just as she would desire. I have my own notions on those subjects, but she thought it was her duty to teach them and most faithfully did she perform it."

⁴ Nelligan, *Arlington House*, p. 89; *Journal of Martha Custis Williams*, November 5, 1853. Arlington historian Eleanor Lee Templeman suggests that the chapel was built around 1823 after the founding of the Virginia Theological Seminary. There does not appear to be any evidence that firmly establishes the date of construction. See Eleanor Lee Templeman, "Early Episcopalians," in *Arlington Heritage: Vignettes of a Virginia County* (Arlington: The Author, 1959), p. 176. Apparently the building was not altered significantly for use as a chapel. The Custis and Lee families repeatedly refer to the structure as "the schoolhouse" and Markie once referred to the clergyman being "in the desk."

⁵ Mary Custis Lee deButts, ed., *Growing Up in the 1850's: The Journal of Agnes Lee*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 33. The chapel was located on the 17-acre tract of land that Custis gave to his slave, Maria Syphax, upon her emancipation in 1826.

⁶ deButts, *Growing Up in the 1850's*, p. 64; Mrs. Burton Harrison, *Recollections Grave and Gay* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 219; *Journal of Martha Custis Williams*, April 2, 1854. The older slaves at Arlington appear to have been more interested in joining the Custis and Lee families for worship. When Markie reintroduced family prayers at Arlington, some of the old Mount Vernon slaves attended. The Custises' attempts to interest their slaves in the Episcopal church met with limited success. Markie noted in her journal that none of the Arlington slaves were Episcopalians; instead, to her dismay, many of them chose to join the Baptist church instead.

⁷ Augusta Blanche Berard, "Arlington and Mount Vernon 1856; As Described in a Letter of Augusta Blanche Berard," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 57, No. 2, April 1949, p. 161; H.C.

Potter to "My Dear Mr. Massey," November 4, 1903, repository unknown. The Henry Potter letter was made available to the author by Sara Collins and was quoted in Mrs. Templeman's "Early Episcopalians." Ironically, Markie often complained in her journal that Mr. Custis seemed incapable of remaining awake during prayers at Arlington House.

⁸ *Journal of Martha Custis Williams*, November 6, 1853.

⁹ deButts, *Growing up in the 1850's*, p. 16; *Journal of Martha Custis Williams*, April 11, 1854 and May 10, 1857.

¹⁰ *Journal of Martha Custis Williams*, April 2, 1854, March 27, 1857, and October 14, 1857. Markie noted in her journal that she felt slightly ashamed when Mr. Potter informed her that his text had been chosen for the benefit of the Custises as well as their slaves.

¹¹ Trinity Episcopal Church, *Parish Profile* (Arlington: Trinity Episcopal Church, 2001), pp. 4-11. Although Mrs. Templeman's book and other local histories state that the chapel was or may have been burned by Union forces in the early part of the Civil War, no source has been cited to support this claim.