

FROM FABULOUS TO FRUMP: THE CHANGING FASHIONS OF MARTHA
WASHINGTON

by

Teresa Teixeira

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ABSTRACT

FROM FABULOUS TO FRUMP: THE CHANGING FASHIONS OF MARTHA WASHINGTON

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This thesis analyzes the extant fragments of Martha Washington's wardrobe in order to place her within the fashion context of her day. The analysis shows that rather than falling into the matronly image Americans associate with her, Martha followed the fashions of her day. Since most of the remaining textiles date to the mid-eighteenth century, the examination of her image through her clothing focuses on her life before the American Revolution, with the latter portion of her life focused on documentary descriptions. Before Martha Washington crafted her image to represent the ideal American woman, she appeared fashionable and worthy of her high social rank.

INTRODUCTION

To say that scholarship regarding Martha Dandridge Custis Washington is lacking compared to that of her husband would be an understatement. While a standard high school textbook for AP American History contains dozens of references to her second husband, George Washington, only a single reference is made to Martha: an apocryphal comment regarding political parties.¹

While she is an ever-present figure in American lore, she exists more as a silhouette than a person. This is certainly due, at least in part, to the burning of her correspondence with her famed husband. Historians have long relied solely on the written word to construct biographies, and where Martha is concerned, we have only the barest outline.

Extremely few letters or invoices stemming directly from her exist, even fewer than the general public may believe as many letters included in early biographies are now thought to have been fabricated. The most numerous written mentions of her by her contemporaries come from after the revolution. In fact, only seven letters even mentioning her survive from before the American Revolution.² The existing descriptions

¹ David M. Kennedy, Lizabeth Cohen, et al, *American Pageant* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.)

² Mary V. Thompson, compiler, "Descriptions of Martha Washington, together with a few references pertinent to the relationship between the Washingtons," Memorandum for The Martha Washington Anniversary Committee, MVLA, December 27, 2013. Unpublished.

of her in the prime of her life amount only to “beautiful,”³ “sweet tempered,”⁴ “agreeable,”⁵ and “cheerful.”⁶

Her husband’s place as a national hero, and the new nation’s first president after the Revolution prompted people to describe her in much greater detail. By the time the thorough descriptions began, she was in her fifties. This undoubtedly lends greatly to the modern public’s perception of Martha as “dowdy,” as illustrated in an online survey about current opinions of Martha Washington.⁷ One responder summed it up by saying that she is “kind of like Mrs. Claus.”⁸ Our view of her life is widely dominated by her last decades, and the several portraits of an elderly Martha dressed in her house clothes instead of the finery most common for portraits.

This sparse, clouded picture of Martha has allowed historians to use her as a blank slate to fulfill whichever narrative purpose they need. Often, since her character was unilaterally praised by those contemporaries who described her, that role is as a model of the ideal traits of womanhood at the time of the biography. This interpretation is understandable considering the number of times Martha was praised as the perfect

³ John Blair to Daniel Parke Custis, April 9, 1749, and n.d., in Josephine Little Zuppan, editor, *The Letterbook of John Custis IV of Williamsburg, 1717-1742* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 15.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Francis Fauquier to William Byrd, 1/23/1759, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, Volume 6, edited by W.W. Abbot (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 175n. And George Washington to Richard Washington, Mount Vernon, 9/20/1759, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, Volume 6, edited by W.W. Abbot (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 359.

⁶ Edmund Pendleton to [unknown], [9/1774?], in *The Letters and Papers of Edmund Pendleton, 1734-1803*, 2 volumes, collected and edited by David John Mays (Charlottesville, Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 1967), 1:98.

⁷ Teixeira, “Martha Washington.”

⁸ Holly Frisosky, survey response, Teixeira, “Martha Washington.”

woman. James Thatcher said she “possess[ed] all the virtues which adorn her sex,”⁹ and the Marquis de Chastellux called her “one of the best women in the world, and beloved by all about her.”¹⁰ She even fulfilled the role of the archetypal perfect woman to her contemporaries. Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, wife of Alexander Hamilton, left nothing to interpretation when she said, “She was always my ideal of a true woman.”¹¹

To Victorians looking to provide a role model to the new middle class, deep in the throes of colonial revival, Martha Washington was the perfect candidate. Her domesticity was emphasized: not only did she keep a book of recipes, she also loved to knit and embroider. She was the quiet, passive wife and the loving, doting grandmother. While most of those traits certainly existed in her person, that view presented a one-dimensional look at a woman who was undoubtedly a more complicated person.

The rise of feminist interpretations of history gave way to new biographies (still new enough to be branded as revisionist histories) eager to rewrite their ideal woman. She was recast as a headstrong, determined woman in charge of her own fate. Instead of emphasizing her life in retirement, they emphasized anecdotes such as her famed confrontation with John Custis, her first father-in-law, during which she completely reversed his opinion of his son’s engagement to her.

One important aspect often used by historians to frame her character is Martha’s appearance. Very little is said of Martha’s physical traits as a young woman, and only

⁹ James Thatcher, *Military Journal of the American Revolution*, 160-161 [note—part of this quote can be found in William Spohn Baker, *Itinerary of General Washington from June 15, 1775, to December 23, 1783* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1892), 152-153].

¹⁰ Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781 and 1782*, 2 volumes, trans. Howard C. Rice, Jr. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 1:298-299.

¹¹ Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, qtd. in Hugh Howard, *Houses of the Founding Fathers: The Men Who Made America and the Way They Lived* (New York: Artisan, 2007), 147.

one portrait from the period survives (fig. 1). Though unflattering by today's standards of beauty, the portrayal of Martha likely has more to do with Wollaston's personal painting style than her actual appearance: her facial features in the Wollaston portrait are strikingly similar to those of nearly all of Wollaston's other sitters.

The descriptions of her physical traits to which we do have access begin, unsurprisingly, after the revolution. Whether portraying Martha positively or negatively, historians tend to use these later descriptors, short and plump, to describe her in all periods of her life. Where they differ, however, is in their interpretation of it. When Martha is needed to take a back seat to George Washington (acting as his second choice of lover or simply as his source of funds) she is described as "overweight" and "rather plain-looking."¹² When she is portrayed as the headstrong protagonist, her short, plump stature makes her a "pocket Venus," desirable to all.¹³

Martha Dandridge Custis Washington knew that the most powerful impression she could make was through her appearance. While makeup and hairstyles could certainly contribute to the message sent to onlookers, the greatest impact was made through clothing.

Luckily for researchers, Martha's celebrity status as the first president's wife turned virtually everything she owned into sentimental keepsakes prized not only by her family, but by an entire nation. In terms of her wardrobe alone, much more still exists than likely would have had she not become a national icon. However, this souvenir mindset caused the wardrobe to be fragmented so it could be spread to as many hands as

¹² Bruce Chadwick, *The General and Mrs. Washington: The Untold Story of a Marriage and a Revolution* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2007), 2.

¹³ Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 27.

possible. Garments were dismantled at the seams, cut into squares, or used to cover everything from needle cases to armchairs.



Figure 1: John Wollaston, *Portrait of Martha Dandridge Custis*. 1757. Oil on canvas. Lee Chapel and Museum, Washington and Lee University.

This dismantling makes it impossible to analyze her wardrobe based on the cut of the garments, but left intact the more important aspect: the fabric. Since the labor of constructing a garment was significantly cheaper than the cost of the material, it was not uncommon to re-cut textiles into newer fashions. Many extant complete garments show a disparity between when the fabric was manufactured and the style of the gown. Since dress fabrics were so commonly reused, having a new, stylish fabric was a greater indicator of the wearer being in fashion than was the cut. By analyzing the textiles Martha wore throughout her life, we can understand the messages she was trying to send through her clothing.

Despite the fact that throughout her life the messages sent by Martha's clothing choices changed, they perfectly reflected her chosen role at each stage of life—marriageable woman, wealthy young bride, socialite, or America's "queen"—too perfectly to have been accidental. Since the historically significant portion of her life was during and after the revolution, her handcrafted image for that period is what has been remembered centuries after her death. Martha Washington was well aware that the world looked to her as a symbol of the new nation and crafted an image of the 'ideal' American woman for which she is still remembered today. However, evidence shows that before she was needed as a national symbol, her goal was to appear fashionable and worthy of the high social rank of her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis.

ADOLESCENCE: A TYPICAL CHILDHOOD

Very little written documentation survives on Martha Dandridge's childhood. The same is true of her textiles. However, a relatively accurate picture of her clothing can be determined by examining the common practices of childrearing in Virginian culture during her adolescence, what her family's position afforded her, and what was locally available.

It is unsurprising that none of Martha's childhood clothing survives: what tend to survive the test of time are pieces that were rarely handled. Like today, children's clothing was indelicately handled by the wearers and, since textiles were so expensive, was often handed down among siblings. With four younger sisters—Anna Marie, Frances, Elizabeth, and Mary—Martha's childhood clothes had very little chance of being saved.

The practice of tailoring clothing specifically to encourage freedom of movement for children did not fully appear until the 1760s as the teachings of Rousseau gained popularity.¹⁴ Born in 1731, Martha would have gone through a brief period of infant dress (straight-cut shirts, napkins [diapers], and caps) before being clothed in miniature versions of adult dress. Children as young as three months were even put into stays.¹⁵

¹⁴ Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe, 1715-1780* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1984), 162.

¹⁵ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (New Haven: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in association with Yale University Press, 2002), 162.

Though not as heavily boned as their adult counterparts, stays encouraged proper posture and helped mold the developing body into the desired, fashionable shape.

This miniaturization of adult fashions allows us to surmise clothing a young Martha would have worn based on the wearing habits of adult women. As the daughter of a middling planter, Martha would have been dressed in relatively fashionable clothing. There is no record of the Dandridges retaining an agent in England, but since they were situated near Virginia's capital and metropolitan hub, Williamsburg, their buying options were wider than most Virginians'.

The most commonly purchased fabric in Fairfax County, Virginia from 1759-1766 was worsted, which could be completely wool or wool/cotton or wool/silk blends.¹⁶ Though it was the most common, it was not considered fashionable.¹⁷ While worsteds could be figured—bearing a woven decorative design, usually floral—and rather fine, the bulk of the worsteds sold were of a grade appropriate for utilitarian clothing. Printed cottons on the other hand were both extremely fashionable and affordable; however they were purchased in smaller quantities signaling their place as a relatively elite item.¹⁸ Unlike the unfashionable worsteds, printed cottons would have been appropriate for Martha to wear to be admired, which would have become a factor around 1746 as she came of an age to be married.

¹⁶ Paul Crowl Reber, "Retail Trade and the Consumer in Fairfax County, Virginia, 1759-1766" (PhD Diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2003), 106.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 111.

Linens were also purchased in great quantity and could vary widely in quality, with Irish linen being the finest.¹⁹ Lawn, a sheer linen or cotton, was purchased in quantities sufficient for accessories and trim.²⁰ Along with small purchases of lace, ribbon, and tape, lawn could be added to an older garment or one made from less fashionable or out-of-date fabric to make it appear more stylish.

As she grew older, it would have become more important, both to Martha and to her family, for her to attract a husband. This would have required the purchase of fashionable clothing to show off her suitability as a wife. Though in Fairfax County silk was purchased in such small quantities as to render it virtually unavailable,²¹ Martha would likely have had a wider selection of fabrics to purchase through Williamsburg vendors, it being the larger metropolis.

The extant fabric with the earliest possible date of wear associated with Martha would fulfill the goal of attracting suitors and would have been appropriate for a woman of high social status to wear to a party or other function. The set of fragments, in the collection of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association is a bright yellow silk with weft float figuring.²² Featuring a point repeat once across its width, it contains a central bouquet motif flanked on either side by serpentine vines. The bouquet is made up of the standard stylized exotic flowers popular during the eighteenth century: tulips, berries, pineapples, and pomegranates grouped together in a vase. While the vines have grape leaves, their

¹⁹ Ibid., 115-116.

²⁰ Ibid., 118, 120.

²¹ Ibid., 101.

²² Accession numbers W-499/A, W-499/C, W-544/G, W-1120, W-1482/A-B, W-2007/A, W-2151, and W-2370/B.

fruits are berries. Various geometric diaper patterns are used to fill the floral elements. This design repeats vertically every 20.5 inches.

The design is in a satin weave while the ground is a plain weave. While this falls in line with the characteristics of a damask weave—a structure that alternates the satin face between either side of the fabric to create a design—the back of the fabric does not show the reverse of the design (plain-woven motif with satin-woven ground). Instead, the fabric looks entirely plain woven with only vague tracings of the outline of the motif. This is because instead of alternating the face of the satin weave, the weaver instead alternated between a plain weave and a satin weave. This imitation damask may have been a way to use less yarn by filling sections with plain weave, which does not require as much yarn as a satin weave. As such, it could be an indication that it would have been priced more cheaply than true damask. How much this difference in price would have been evident to the standard observer is uncertain.

The shortcut is more understandable when one considers damask's place in the hierarchy of figured silks. Silks of any kind were always expensive, and as more patterning techniques were added in the weaving of a fabric, thus increasing production time, the skill level of the weaver, and the amount of materials required, prices rose even higher. Silk weavers in England specialized in a single type of product, be it flowered silks, handkerchiefs, or even simply black silk.²³ Damasks were produced by weavers specializing in flowered silks, which could include the most complicated woven

²³ Natalie Rothstein, *The Victoria & Albert Museum's Textile Collection: Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750* (New York: Canopy Books, 1994), 8.

decorations.²⁴ While many of the silks produced by the weavers could have several sets of both warps and wefts needed to create a certain design, damasks only used one set of each, making them much simpler and faster to produce.²⁵ This placed them at the lower end of high-end silks with a Mr. Ashburner going so far as to call damasks “common things” in 1765.²⁶ Thus, it is no great leap of understanding to see why weavers would use a cost-cutting technique on a type of fabric already called “common.”

Damasks seem to exist in a sort of limbo: as a figured silk, damasks were considerably more expensive than the textiles being purchased and used by the average consumer, but because of the limitations of single-color designs and their low price relative to other figured silks, they were not necessarily as fashionable and sought after as more complicated figured silks. As such, they are difficult to precisely date without corresponding dated designs, since damask styles changed significantly more slowly than those of other weaving techniques.²⁷ This is evidenced in John Singleton Copley’s *Nicholas Boylston* (fig. 2). Though painted in 1767, the damask banyan has a very large design that would not have been out of place several decades earlier. By the time Boylston posed for this painting, multi-colored silk designs were fairly diminutive, with a repeating height of only eight or nine inches.²⁸ This is obviously not the case with Boylston’s damask, which leads us to conclude that we cannot date damask based solely on the trends evident in other types of figured silks. The dated designs for damasks

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁷ Natalie Rothstein, *The Victoria & Albert Museum’s Textile Collection: Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850* (New York: Canopy Books, 1994), 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

corroborate this by showing that damask patterns remained larger and more conservative than their multicolored counterparts, even when drawn by the same designers.²⁹



Figure 2: John Singleton Copley, Nicholas Boylston. 1767. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

²⁹ Rothstein, *Woven Textiles Design in Britain to 1750*, 16.

Despite this uncertainty, this fabric does contain certain motifs that may help point to a more concise date, the early end of which is before Martha's first marriage in 1750, possibly making this the oldest of her extant textiles. A notable part of the design is the serpentine pattern that borders either side. Though already in use as a design feature, Hogarth deemed the serpentine line "the line of beauty" in his 1753 *Analysis of Beauty*, solidifying its presence in textile designs.³⁰ More interesting, however, are the various diaper patterns used to fill some of the flowers. Though they are reminiscent of the lace patterned silks of the 1720s, they are also similar to the stiff diaper patterns that appeared as both ground decoration and inside motifs of multicolored figured silks in the 1750s.³¹ This could place the fabric in a transitional period between the two styles.

During the possible time frame of this fabric's construction, virtually every weaving center had the technology to create damask (or in this case imitation damask), and virtually every major European weaving center was imitating French designs, making them largely indistinguishable. However, as an English colony, Virginia was under several trade restrictions that can help us narrow down the piece's probable place of construction. The Navigation Acts of 1660 were the first laws to restrict trade to the American colonies, allowing them only English shipping sources.³² Though silk was not one of the major English exports to its colonies, it was in fact exported to all of their usual trade destinations, with the American colonies being the most important market for

³⁰ Ibid., 7.

³¹ Peter Thornton, *Baroque and Rococo Silks* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), 128.

³² Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 78.

the export of luxury goods.³³ American colonists could also purchase Chinese silks through the East India Company, a good that was not permitted in England in order to protect domestic producers.³⁴ Chinese silks were generally deemed cheaper than English silks since they were produced in a much larger width than their English counterparts.³⁵ The actual width of the yellow fabric, which measures only fifteen and a half inches from selvedge to selvedge, makes it narrow even for production in England. Further, Chinese silk designs usually repeated three times across the width of the fabric, while the design of this fabric mirrors only once down the center.³⁶ In 1722 a duty on English exported silks was lowered, making the silks slightly more affordable to American consumers.³⁷

This set of fragments has received slightly more attention than many of the others in the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association collections because of multiple claims that it is from the gown Martha wore when she married George Washington.³⁸ The claims followed the description of her outfit by her great-granddaughter Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon as purple sequined shoes and a silver and white petticoat worn with a gown of "deep yellow brocade with rich lace in the neck and sleeves."³⁹ Kennon's description of the gown was made over a century after Martha's wedding, which casts suspicion on her description. However, as many of the Washingtons' personal items descended through the Peter family, it is possible that Britannia personally saw a fragment with a strong enough provenance to have been at the time definitively known as Martha's

³³ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ Baumgarten, 82.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 9.

³⁸ MVLA curatorial files, W-499/A, W-499/C, W-544/G, W-1120, W-1482/A-B, W-2007/A, W-2151, W-2370/B.

³⁹ Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon, ca. 1899, MVLA curatorial file, W-2667/A&B.

wedding gown. Even if she had indeed seen the fabric or was correctly recounting an accurate description, this fabric could not have been that used for the wedding gown. While it is incorrect to always assume a great familiarity with textile terms when dealing with written or verbal accounts, brocade is always multicolored making it unlikely that she would have mistakenly used the term to describe a damask-like fabric.

Due to Martha's acclaimed wealth and Washington's fame at the time of their marriage, it is more likely that a more fashionable and expensive fabric would have been used for the "yellow brocade" of her wedding gown—especially if it were worn over a petticoat woven with silver and shoes covered in sequins. A less-fashionable damask would have diminished the effect of these grandiose accessories.

There are also claims that the fabric was taken from the Washingtons' marriage bed, a claim that at first seems too close to the claim of wedding gown to be believable. However, much as the wedding gown claim has stayed attached to the pieces due to Britannia's description of the gown, the marriage bed claim is difficult to dismiss because it too matches a description. Just over a year before their marriage, George Washington bought a used bed at auction from London, hung with "yellow silk and worsted damask furniture."⁴⁰ While this fabric is fully silk, it could still have been used to complement the yellow damask of the bed hangings. If the fabric was indeed made to be a furnishing fabric, it opens up the possibility of another place of construction: Italy.⁴¹ Demand for

⁴⁰ "Invoice of Sundry Goods Shipd by Richd Washington pr the Sally Captn Dick, bound to Rappahannock in Virginia, on the proper Account and Risque of Collo. George Washington, & co consignd to himself or Collo. John Carlyle." London, August 20, 1757. *The Papers of George Washington Digital Editions*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.

⁴¹ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 8.

furnishing silks in England was not great enough to merit substantial production of it domestically, so virtually all silk weavers focused solely on dress silks.⁴²

During Martha's adolescence, this fabric would have been sumptuous enough to show her to be a desirable match to any suitor while not being overly showy or expensive. Since damask patterns were much slower to change than their more expensive counterparts, it would also have represented a practical investment on the part of her parents since it would have stayed in fashion for several seasons. Later in her life, in comparison to her other, more extravagant silks, the fabric would have remained appropriate for dinners and parties, a use which may be evident from the rust-colored stains across several of the fragments, which appears to be wine.

Martha owned another extremely similar yellow damask.⁴³ While the similar dates, 1730-1750 for the previously discussed faux damask and 1720-1755 for this design, are indicative of the slow changes in damask patterns, the dating of this piece proves even looser because of the trends that took place both at the beginning and end of the possible dates. The most noticeable design difference between this fabric's pattern and the one previously discussed is the geometric, diaper filling that surrounds the motif. Virtually no solid ground exists; it is instead filled with a pattern that appears to be in imitation of netting. The motif is also filled with geometric patterning: zig-zags and triangles fill the flower petals and other elements.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Accession numbers W-499/B, W-544/D, W-1386, W-2210, and W-3648.

In the 1720s, lace-patterned silks, with geometric diaper patterning outside the motif, made a resurgence in fashion.⁴⁴ Lace-patterned silks developed as a way to imitate lace during the Renaissance; as an early design motif, they often featured stiffly symmetrical point repeats.⁴⁵ However, the semi-naturalism of the flowers involved in the design would place it toward the end of the lace-patterning trend, in the early 1730s.

Another possible explanation for the patterning surrounding the motif is the popularity of ground patterning in the 1750s. Ground patterning, whether in the same weaving techniques as the main motif or a more subtle technique rose in popularity to the point where weavers forced designers to add ground patterning to their already drawn designs.⁴⁶ These patterns usually included small flowers that alternated orientation, or a diaper pattern within curvilinear scrollwork to simulate ribbons of lace.⁴⁷ Though any date within the range of 1730-1755 is possible for this damask, a date toward the earlier end of the spectrum is more likely due to the geometric patterning. While not a true lace-patterned silk, the patterning is closer to that used in lace-patterned silks than to the ground patterning of the early 1750s.

Unlike the previous yellow silk, this one is a true damask. While the last example alternated between a plain weave and a satin weave to create the design, this piece simply alternates the face of a satin weave. One side shows the face of the satin weave on the design while showing the reverse of the satin weave (or tie-downs, which look like plain weave) on the ground. Thus, the opposite side of the fabric shows the opposite design:

⁴⁴ Thornton, 109.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁶ Rothstein, *Woven Textiles to 1750*, 17.

⁴⁷ See Ibid, 102-117 for a pictorial survey of silks showing ground patterning.

the motifs show the plain weave while the ground shows the satin weave. While the two techniques create an effect that is virtually indistinguishable on the obverse of the fabric, the true damask technique, which requires that the entire fabric be created by a satin weave, would have necessitated a greater number of yarns to fill the same dimensions of cloth. This could indicate an increase in price, making this silk more costly, and thus desirable, than the previous silk.

The fabric with a provenance of being worn by Martha Washington that is easiest to date is a two-color damask, several skirt panels of which are in the collection of Colonial Williamsburg (fig. 3).⁴⁸ The reason for its ease of dating is because the design exactly matches an extant watercolor design from Spitalfields silk designer Anna Maria Garthwaite.

Despite the ease of dating the fabric, determining when it was worn and by whom is more difficult. Since fragments of the same fabric are in the collections of Mount Vernon and Tudor Place from different lines of the descent, the claim that it descended in the Dandridge or Washington family is confirmed; however, it may not have been Martha who wore it.

The design dates to 1743, when Martha was twelve. However, the skirt panels are the same length as some of Martha's other skirt panels that date to the 1760s (discussed below), and they do not appear to have been altered. It is unlikely that the fabric would have sat unused until Martha was her full height, so it may be more likely that it was used by an older member of her family. While it may have been passed down

⁴⁸ Accession number 1975-342.

to Martha, it either was never altered for her own wear, or she did not wear it until she was grown enough not to alter the skirt.



Figure 3: Anna Maria Garthwaite, designer. Gown skirt panel. Silk damask. Spitalfields, England. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

The fabrics extant from this period of her life show a Martha who was fitting in to her societal role as a lower gentry planter's daughter: they are obviously expensive, but

towards the lower end of the scale of luxury goods. The imitation damask, in particular, shows a potential regard for economy. The fabrics indicated to observers someone who was dressing to their rank and projecting that rank outward.

The fabrics do not show a young Martha Washington aware of the public gaze or making political statements through her clothing. Nor do they show a woman so concerned with economy and industry that she shunned visibly luxurious goods. The Martha they reveal was exactly what you would expect of a Virginia planter's daughter. This image of luxurious economy continued into her first marriage to Daniel Park Custis in 1750, expanding along with her newfound rank.

FIRST MARRIAGE: SECURE AND DESERVING

In May of 1750, at the age of eighteen, Martha Dandridge married the rich planter Daniel Parke Custis. Though the social scene in colonial Virginia was no doubt small enough that Martha was already familiar with many of its players, this new wealth afforded her a new position. With the embarrassment of John Custis' famed outrage at her betrothal to his son still present in the minds of her peers, Martha may have felt the need to prove that she deserved her new station, despite the opinions of her new father-in-law.

In a period of conspicuous consumption, the most efficient way to prove one's status was to purchase and be seen consuming fashionable objects in a tasteful manner. The most conspicuous object was undoubtedly clothing: not only were textiles some of the most expensive products available, they were seen everywhere the wearer went. A large number of sumptuous silks, the most elite of clothing textiles, survive from this period of Martha's life—all of which are well-designed, fashionable, and clearly expensive. As Martha Dandridge Custis no doubt knew, her superior clothing served as a message that was easily translatable to her peers: she had wealth enough to display it on her person in a manner that many could not. She was not a country girl, unaware of the prevalent fashions and how to utilize them; she was the deserving wife of one of the richest men in Virginia.

One of the most extraordinarily well-designed silks dates to the early portion of Martha's first marriage. Four pieces remain in the collection of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, having been remade from a gown into chair upholstery, and then divided among five descendents. The largest of these shows a wonderfully executed bundle of flowers atop a fawn ground dotted with daisies (Fig. 4). The main fawn-colored ground is a satin weave, with the warp floating above four wefts between each tie-down. The ground patterning of the fabric, showing white daisies with shaded green leaves placed in alternating orientations (ascending then descending), was created through the use of continuous supplementary weft floats. This causes the difference in color between the obverse and reverse in the fabric (Fig. 5): the supplementary wefts are contained within the fabric's weave structure without being necessary to it. When they are visible in the flowers, they are floated above the base weave without compromising its structural integrity. Floating the yarns above the ground structure is what causes the flowers to show on the back in negative (Fig. 5).

The main design (which was originally pink, magenta, purple, brown, yellow, and blue) is done in brocade: since silk was expensive, the brocade wefts are discontinuous. Instead of stretching the width of the fabric, the wefts are used only in the places where they are visible. A brocading technique that sets this fabric apart from earlier examples is point rentré. Developed by Jean Revel in Lyon, France and in popular use throughout European weaving centers by 1732, point rentré is the practice of interlocking adjacent brocade colors.⁴⁹ Viewed closely, point rentré looks only like alternating stripes of color, but from even a short distance—especially the distance from which people would see the

⁴⁹ Thornton, *Baroque and Rococo Silks* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 121.

fabric while it was being worn—this achieves a gradient effect, allowing the adjacent colors to fade into each other without adding further shades. This effect lent itself to the rising style of naturalism, allowing floral motifs to be portrayed much more realistically than previously possible.



Figure 4: Silk brocade, obverse. England. 1745-1755. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.



Figure 5: Silk brocade, reverse. England. 1745-1755. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

These new possibilities ushered in a period of extreme naturalism, especially in England. As the fabric has a history of being worn in the English colony of Virginia, it is no surprise that the silk is typical of English styles. As mentioned, America was one of England's most important trade colonies in regards to its exportation of luxury goods,

including woven silk.⁵⁰ By the 1750s, the American colonies were still under strict trade restrictions; that, coupled with the cost of producing one's own fabric being so high, ensured that English textiles were the most easily available and cheapest option.⁵¹ Often, the sale of English textiles to American customers was facilitated through a sort of personal shopper: a contact in England would receive a letter of order from an American relative or friend, purchase the goods from English merchants, and ship them to the colonies. One particularly popular request by American merchants was for silk with a "pale coffee" colored ground, like we see in this fragment.⁵²

The preference for muted colors like the fawn ground was a chiefly English taste; English textile designs were more naturalistic than French designs both in form and color.⁵³ English woven silks portrayed flowers in the most realistic way possible, shying away from the imaginative coloring and abstract forms popular in France. The 1740s in particular show the most marked difference between French and English styles: while French silks were exuberantly colored, English silks stayed naturalistic, dainty, and reserved.⁵⁴

One of the champions of English naturalism was the designer Anna Maria Garthwaite, whose hand and style are extremely evident in this design. Garthwaite operated in England's main weaving center, Spitalfields, as a freelance designer from the 1720s to the 1750s. Her extreme naturalism began halfway through 1742, and by 1743,

⁵⁰ Rothstein, *The Victoria & Albert Museum's Textile Collection: Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750* (New York: Canopy Books 1994), 8.

⁵¹ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 78.

⁵² Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

her designs were scaled to life and modeled after real and recognizable flowers.⁵⁵ Though the majority of her designs are yet unpublished, this fragment bears a striking resemblance to those that are, showing many signs of her hand. For example, the serpentine vine motif visible with the blue flowers began appearing in her designs 1743.⁵⁶ Examples of this are visible in both the fragment and a silk produced from an authenticated Garthwaite design in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum.⁵⁷

The flowers that appear in this fragment are not only typical characters in Garthwaite's designs, but they show distinct signs of her hand. The two-colored stems and leaves, eschewing point rentré despite its use in other portions of the same design, appear both here and in some of her other designs. The seemingly haphazard bundle of flowers is also typical of Garthwaite's designs. Perhaps most convincing, however, are the portrayal of the flowers themselves. When turning out several designs on a timeline for a commission, it is no surprise that designers often reuse their own material, whether consciously or not. Garthwaite consistently included roses, carnations, and parrot tulips in her designs, some of which are nearly identical in form and color to the ones on Martha's fabric. As flowered silk designers were never numerous at any given time in Spitalfields,⁵⁸ it can safely be asserted that Martha Washington's fabric was either designed by Anna Maria Garthwaite or shows a conscious effort to closely imitate her style.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 16.

While the similarities with Garthwaite's designs are useful for dating the fragment, there are aspects of the design and execution that indicate a time of production independent of these comparisons. As previously mentioned, point rentré was not developed until 1732, so its presence in this fabric definitively places it after that date. The stepped—or what could today be considered pixilated—appearance of the outline of the design when viewed closely is characteristic of designs woven on a drawloom: before the invention of the jacquard loom, warp threads could only be moved in groups of 3 to 10 because of friction considerations.⁵⁹ This places the fabric before the early nineteenth century.⁶⁰ The naturalism of the main design places it in the late 1730s through the early 1750s, when patterns started to become more formal and stiff.⁶¹ The life-size scale of the flowers makes them smaller than the designs popular in the 1730s,⁶² but the repeat remains much larger than what became popular in the later in the century. The daisy patterning dotting the ground of fabric was a popular addition from 1747 to the early 1750s.⁶³ Ground patterning became so popular, in fact, that some weavers forced pattern drawers to remake their designs to include ground patterning—whether it made sense in the design or not.⁶⁴ The weaver Thomas Brant skipped that step, altering a Garthwaite design to include a self-colored diaper patterning in the ground that was not included in the design drawing.⁶⁵ The light gathering of the flowers in the main design also

⁵⁹ Ibid., 10

⁶⁰ Jennifer Harris, "A Survey of Textile Techniques," in *5,000 Years of Textiles*, ed. Jennifer Harris (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 19.

⁶¹ Thornton, *Baroque and Rococo Silks*, 126-128.

⁶² Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 16.

⁶³ Ibid., 17-18.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

corresponds to what was fashionable in 1747 to 1749.⁶⁶ Thus, the fragment can confidently be dated from the late 1740s to the very early 1750s.

Both the design and execution are remarkable. The naturalistic portrayal of the flowers resonates even today. Multiple difficult techniques were utilized in various parts of the fabric, making this fabric at the higher end of not only its contemporary textiles in general, but of contemporary silks. The original, bright brocading colors would have been striking against the neutral “pale coffee” ground. However, this level of beauty and mastery undoubtedly contributed to the poor current condition of the fabric as it was loved enough to be reused as upholstery.

The date of the textile corresponds to Martha’s teenage years, making it likely that she acquired it nearly immediately after her first marriage to Daniel Parke Custis in 1750. Family history holds that the fabric came from one of her dresses, which was likely made and worn soon after she acquired the fabric.⁶⁷ She kept the gown for the rest of her life—though no record exists to indicate whether or not it was altered to remain fashionable later in Martha’s life. After her death, it was used to upholster a chair in the bedroom of her granddaughter, Martha Parke Custis Peter, at Tudor Place in Washington, DC.⁶⁸ At her death, Martha Peter willed her Washington keepsakes to her five grandchildren, with the chair going to Agnes Peter.⁶⁹ Noticing that the fabric was significantly worn and knowing its sentimental value, Agnes removed the fabric from the chair and divided it

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Acquisition Information, File for Object W-2154/A (Alexandria, VA: George Washington’s Mount Vernon Estate, Museum & Gardens).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

into five pieces.⁷⁰ Though this further fragmented the textile, each piece becoming smaller than a full design repeat, the division undoubtedly saved the fabric from further decay. Now, four of the five pieces are held at George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate, Museum, and Gardens while the fifth is held at Tudor Place Historic House and Garden.

The poor condition of this fragment is accentuated by a comparison to a similar fabric with a very close history. Martha's sister, Elizabeth Dandridge Aylett Henly, owned and wore a gown made from very stylistically similar fabric with a close date of circa 1750 (fig. 6).⁷¹ She even willed the gown to her daughter-in-law to use as upholstery.⁷² Her directions were not followed however, and the fabric remains in pristine condition, despite the dress having been remade at least once.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 86.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.



Figure 6: Gown. Spitalfields England. Brocaded Silk. Ca. 1750 (textile), remade ca 1770. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

The similarities between Martha's textile and her sister's seem almost too close to be coincidental. The most noticeable stylistic differences are the ground patterning that is absent on Elizabeth's silk, and the greater brightness of the brocade colors in Martha's silk. However, the passion for fawn-colored grounds with extremely naturalistic flowers completely dominated the fashion scene of the early 1750s, both in America and

England. Martha herself had several examples of this style dating from this period of her life. While the brocading of the others did not reach the artistry of this example, many also included silver brocade, an extremely showy and costly technique.

The most useful object for examining these remnants is a sewing case at Mount Vernon pieced from six fabrics dating to the early 1750s (Fig. 7). Four of the six fabrics feature cream-colored grounds with almost life-sized, semi-naturalistic florals. The first example, closest to the red felt, shows both impressive silk brocading as well as silver brocading.

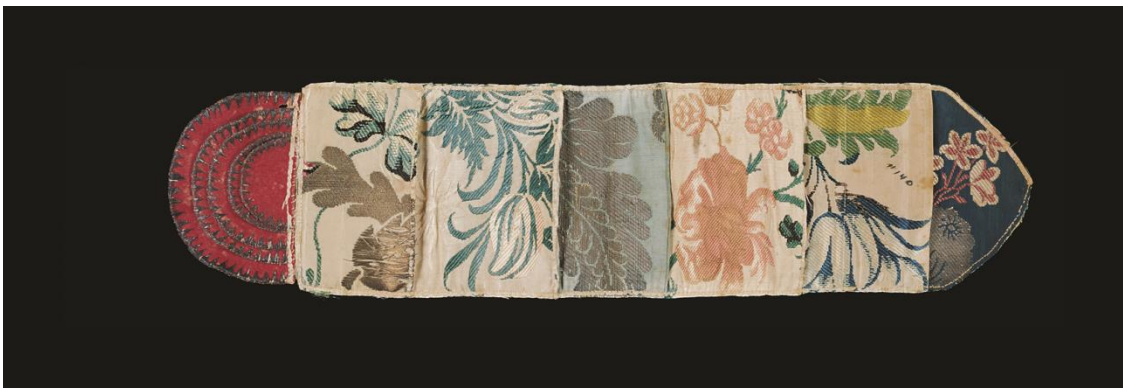


Figure 7: Needlecase. Silk, metallic threads, felt. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

The small fragment shows only a portion of a meandering blue stem with two bulbous blue, black, and white leaves. While the colors of the leaves are not completely true to life, the shading is consistent with the shape of the leaves, rather than in straight lines. A small amount of point rentré is used to add dimension to the leaves. An interesting aspect of the silk brocading is the obvious diagonal striping, consistent with a

twill weave. This is usually indicative of a lampas weave structure. Lampas, called “tissue” by Spitalfields weavers and designers of the period, is a compound weave structure in which two weave structures are woven simultaneously on the same loom and interwoven.⁷⁴ The design of the fabric is made visible when the wefts of the secondary fabric are floated above the primary fabric. The most complicated aspect of the structure is that the weave of the two fabrics are different (i.e. one is plain while the other is twill), and that a fabric is not a true lampas without the secondary, binding warps.

The ground weave of the face of this fragment is a plain weave, and the design is a 4/1 twill, seemingly indicative of the differing, secondary fabric structure. However, an examination of the reverse of the fabric shows that there is in fact no secondary structure: the blue, black and cream yarns of the design are discontinuous: they are placed only underneath the design instead of stretching the width of the fabric. While the twilled brocade gives the impression of a lampas weave, by forgoing the actual technique, the weaver saved significant time and effort in both loom setup and weaving, as well as in materials used. This could be transmitted to the consumer in terms of a greatly lowered price.

The most striking part of the fragment is undoubtedly the silver brocaded leaves. Unlike metallic clothing today, the silver brocade was created from actual silver, which was hammered into thin strips and wound around a thread core. The upper leaf shares both weave structure and design with the leaves: not only is the leaf rounded and bulbous like its silk counterparts, the brocade is also done in a twill pattern. The lower leaf

⁷⁴ Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650-1870: A dictionary based on original documents, prints and paintings, commercial records, American merchants' papers, shopkeepers' advertisements, and patternbook with original swatches of cloth* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007), 275.

however, both uses a different technique and has a different shape. Instead of an oak leaf, this one is spiky like the exotic leaves of pineapple trees or aloe. Instead of being bound into a twill weave, the brocade shows no obvious tie down pattern, appearing to float across the entire design. This difference in technique would cause the two leaves to appear to be shaded differently as they reflected light: the surface of the upper leaf is more broken up by the tie downs, which would cause it to reflect less light. The surface of the lower leaf is virtually uninterrupted, allowing it reflect the maximum amount of light possible for silver thread. This would cause the upper leaf to appear both duller and darker in shade without needing to use two different types of reflective metals or two different techniques of creating silver thread.

The silver brocading would have added significant weight to the overall garment. Robes à la françaises, or sack-back gowns, could use up to fourteen yards of fabric, a significant weight even without the added heft of metal.⁷⁵ This could be another explanation for the use of twilled brocade rather than lampas: using discontinuous supplementary wefts instead of continuous supplementary wefts and secondary warps served to make the fabric lighter.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has a few textiles in its collection with silver brocading, all of which are extraordinarily luxurious.⁷⁶ While these may seem to normalize the use of silver on gowns, and make Martha's small piece of silver brocade seem simple in comparison, none have a history of being worn in America. To take her place as one of the richest women in Virginia, Martha only had to compete with other

⁷⁵ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 12.

⁷⁶ Accession numbers 1990-12,1 and 1973-55.

Virginian women. Anywhere she wore these fabrics, she would stand out as one of the only, if not the only, women who was literally wearing money.

The next fragment in the series follows the same style. Though no silver is present, the fabric is nonetheless luxurious. The fragment shows tulips and leaves, again done in a twilled brocade on a satin woven ground to imitate lampas. Though now faded, the original colors were pink and green, a color combination that appears regularly in brocaded tulips of this period. The scale of the flowers is similar to that in the other fragments, suggesting that this piece dates to around the same period. Though it does not show the amount of detail in shading as some of the other pieces, the tulip is colored along the natural veins of the petals, a mark of good design that is not always present even in high-end designs.

Instead of silver brocade, the twilled silk brocade of this piece is complemented by a subtle damask motif giving texture to the open ground. In this case, the damask shows a rose, delicately contrasting the exotic flowers of the brocade. Damask elements were a common inclusion in many designs of the late 1740s and early 1750s as a way to subtly add ground patterning, which became extremely popular.⁷⁷

Though the fourth fragment from the end shows only a salmon-pink cabbage rose with small pink flowers, more of it can be seen on the back of the needle case (Fig. 8). The rose grows from a serpentine, dark green vine bearing several exuberantly rococo leaves. The twilled brocade includes eight colors in total, each of which would require a separate shuttle. While that seems inconsequential today, a 1756 article on silk designing

⁷⁷ For several examples, see Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750* and *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*.

instructed weavers to “keep the number of shuttles or the workmanship as low as possibly he can, except it be in very rich stuffs, where the price of workmanship is not minded.”⁷⁸ The article priced “very rich stuffs” at “two or three shillings per yard more or less.”⁷⁹

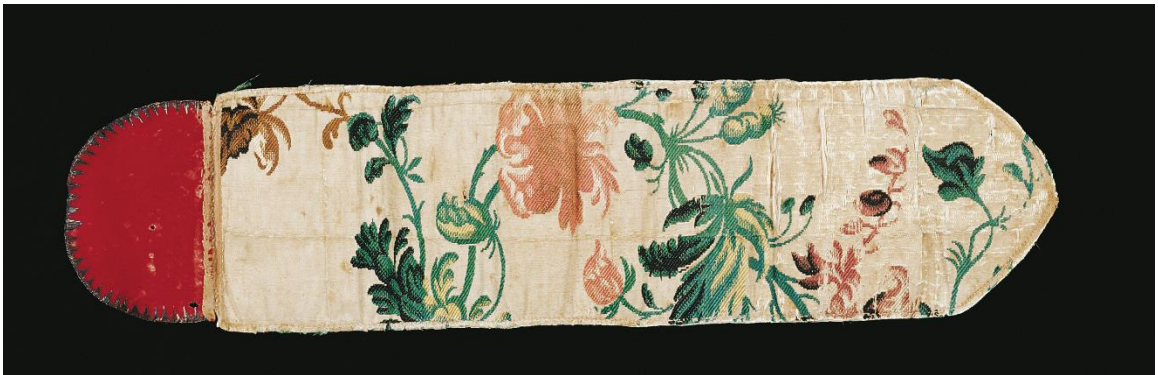


Figure 8: Needlecase, reverse. Silk, metallic threads, felt. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

While the coloring of the rose and its stem and leaves is fairly naturalistic, the vine changes to both a brown color—with accompanying brown leaves—and a pink color—with small pink leaves and berries. While naturalistic coloring was without a doubt favored during this stylistic period, changes in tone were also fairly common. Brown vines, resembling woody bark more than vines, were a common inclusion in many survivals.⁸⁰ What makes this design slightly unique however, is the interweaving of the three stem colors: when changes in stem colors occur in the same design, it is most often between repeats, so the vines do not intermingle. At least in the case of the brown stem in this fabric, it clearly sprouts from the green vine; the pink stem likely does as well.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Objects T.171-1965 and T.219.1989, Victoria & Albert Museum.

The final fawn-colored silk included in the needle case most closely imitates lampas. As mentioned, in a lampas weave, the secondary wefts stretch the width of the fabric and are held in place by binding warps; as such, they often present on the face of the fabric in stripes rather than the intricate color patterns of most brocades. This striping is seen in the leaf of this fragment: instead of being colored along the natural veins of the leaf, it is colored in horizontal stripes of green, lime green, and blue. This fabric also imitates the twill weave that would be present in lampas. However, the supplementary wefts are discontinuous, making this both less costly and less heavy than a true lampas.

The flowers on the fragment are semi-naturalistic in both form and coloring. While the three shades of blue follow the natural contours of the flower, the form of the flower is slightly too thin and angular for the tulip it is likely meant to represent. The stems of the flowers are not naturalistically colored: they are the same blue as the flowers themselves.

The needle case also contains two fabrics that do not fit into the style of fawn grounds under naturalistic flowers: the central panel is a light blue with heavy silver brocade, and the other—used on the triangular tab—is a navy blue with both silk and silver brocade.

Along with fawn, or “pale coffee,” colored grounds, light blue was another popular request by American merchants.⁸¹ American colonists’ preference for muted colors, such as the fawn and light blue, as opposed to brighter colors, such as scarlet, is

⁸¹ Natalie Rothstein, “Silk in European and American Trade before 1783: A commodity of commerce or a frivolous luxury?,” lecture transcript, Textile Society of America Symposium, 1990. Accessed June 17, 2013, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1615&context=tsaconf>.

often attributed to a “Puritan tradition.”⁸² However, this religious tradition was not present in Virginia as it was in New England, making it more likely that they were popular purely for reasons of fashion rather than philosophy. This is especially probable with this particular light blue fabric: a Puritanical preference for muted colors would be entirely contradicted by the heavy silver brocading that would be considered unnecessary expense, luxury, and personal attention.

The silver thread for this piece was created by wrapping a thinly hammered ribbon of silver around a thread core. Shading was achieved through the tightness of this wrapping: the silver thread making up the central portion of the leaf is wrapped more tightly than the silver thread making up the outer portion of the leaf. Even though there is virtually no silver thread on the underside of the fabric, the metal would have significantly increased the weight of the fabric. As today, having precious metals woven into one’s clothing would have been seen as a clear sign of wealth, especially when there were very few, if any, comparable fabrics being worn by her local contemporaries.

The final fragment used in the needle case follows neither the fawn-colored ground style nor the American preference for muted colors. The ground color for this fabric is a dark navy blue, and while the majority of the design is lost, what is visible is white and pink semi-naturalistic floral twilled brocade and silver brocade. The light color of the flowers over the dark ground creates a striking contrast, especially considering the imaginative coloring of the pink stem.

The imaginative, bright coloring of the piece along with the extensive, glittery silver brocade evidenced by the rose, would certainly have made the wearer stand out

⁸² Ibid.

amidst a sea of beige. The bright colors could be indicative of French manufacture: while the English favored light grounds, the French favored dark, like we see in this piece.⁸³ Lyon, in particular, favored the use of rich purples and shades of pink similar to the one seen here.⁸⁴

If the fabric were indeed from France, it may imply rebellious activity on the part of the person who bought it. Virginia was founded by England under the mercantile system in part to act as a market for English goods; as such, it was subject to a number of trade restrictions from its inception.⁸⁵ While silks made up only a small percentage of England's exports to the American colonies, they were nevertheless important enough to be protected by law. In England, woven Persian and Indian silks could not be sold from the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁸⁶ While the American colonies had more leeway in what they could purchase (unlike in England, Asian silks and printed cottons were legal), it was still limited only to items that economically benefitted English interests.⁸⁷ Thus, they were limited to items traded through the East India Company. As England's main rival and nemesis, French goods were strictly banned. Unlike the Asian fabrics that were allowed into the colonies, French fabrics could not be brought into England at all. This eliminated the normal channels of trade available to American colonists. Any French silks seen in the American colonies would have to have been imported illegally.

Another trend that took place during the middle of the eighteenth century, which may have allowed the previous navy silk not to stand out quite so much, was a love of the

⁸³ Thornton, *Baroque and Rococo Silks*, 61.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁵ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 78.

⁸⁶ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 9.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

color yellow. Several different fabrics from Martha's wardrobe are yellow—both damasks and brocades. One such yellow silk is dated to the period of her first marriage and bears an incredibly unique and complicated weave structure (Fig. 9).

The most striking aspect of this set of fragments (seven pieces: W-1528/C-H, W-2215/B) is the bright, vibrant coloring. The ground color is still a joyous yellow, virtually unfaded by the centuries, and the flowers are imaginatively colored in vivid purples and pinks. The flamboyant colors stand in stark contrast to the image of Martha that has been passed down through history. She is seen as a reserved, austere figure, blending into the background with her unassuming personality, the opposite of what this fabric seems to suggest.



Figure 9: Silk fragment. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

To set off the color, the background is woven in a complicated alternating tobine, or canelé, weave. The weave is similar in appearance to uncut corduroy, except in this case, the floats alternate position, giving the fabric a broken or checkered appearance. A supplementary warp is floated over five wefts of the plain-woven foundation before being secured beneath one weft. The textural pattern is created by alternating the location of the tie-downs after every sixth supplementary warp to be at the center of the preceding floated section (three wefts apart). Thus, if you follow a tie-down for the length of six floated warps, you will arrive at the center, or apex, of the floats of the next section. The supplementary warps are thicker than the foundation warps and only very lightly twisted so each float section acts a single body of fibers, without visible separations. The weave structure significantly alters the way the lustrous silk fibers play with light: while a satin weave would reflect large, smooth sections of light, the broken floats cause the gown to appear faceted, reflecting instead multiple small points of light.

This complicated ground pattern would have greatly increased the difficulty and time required to produce this silk than that required to produce a plain taffeta. The production of any figured silk was a labor intensive and intricate process. Before even beginning to weave, it often took three weeks to set up the loom,⁸⁸ which had to be changed for each design.⁸⁹ For tobines, only the ground warp would be wound on the warp beam: the supplementary warps would be wound on separate bobbins, then threaded through the figure harness, the heddles, then the reed.⁹⁰ Even once the loom was set up,

⁸⁸ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 10.

⁸⁹ Thornton, *Baroque and Rococo Silks*, 23.

⁹⁰ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 10.

weaving was slow, with a yard or two of fabric production per day considered fair.⁹¹ On top of the complicated set up, English weavers could only produce four pieces (lengths of at most 50 yards) of every design, which meant that the cost of setting up the loom could only be spread across approximately twelve gowns.⁹² The price book of 1769 shows that each design feature was priced separately, so the continuous weft floats of the ground flowers and the brocade each would have added extra cost.⁹³

The flowers dotting the fabric are made with two techniques: the polychrome flowers are done in discontinuous weft brocade while the white daisy-like ground flowers are continuous supplementary weft floats. Brocade was a popular technique during the period because expensive silk was not wasted on the unseen side of the fabric: since the floated wefts were discontinuous, it allowed them to only be used where they were seen.⁹⁴

The flowers themselves are smaller than life size, which would generally point to a date later in the century, but the overall design repeat is greater than eleven inches (the length of the longest fragment). Design repeats gradually shrank throughout the century from up to four feet in the 1730s,⁹⁵ to eight or nine inches in the 1760s, to three or four inches in the 1770s.⁹⁶

In addition to the scale of the design, the aesthetics of the design also point to date in the middle of the century. Textured grounds, like the one seen here, and vibrant yellow

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Thornton, *Baroque and Rococo Silks*, 25.

⁹³ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*, 9.

⁹⁴ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in England to 1750*, 10

⁹⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 10

became extremely popular.⁹⁷ The brocaded flowers also fall in line with this stylistic date. In the early 1750s, while generally still life-size, flowers tended to be shown with shorter stems and fewer leaves than the designs of the previous years.⁹⁸ While the largest bouquet features both pink roses and purple daffodil-like flowers, only rose leaves are shown, and the stems are shorter than the loose bouquets of the previous decade.

As discussed earlier, technological advancements such as point rentré allowed for the development of an extreme naturalism in England, which dominated silk designs through the 1740s and much of the 1750s.⁹⁹ England used this as an opportunity to move away from French styles, which had until then completely dominated the market, making it virtually impossible to assign an unknown textile to a specific country. To make matters more difficult, many of the weavers operating out of Spitalfields were descended from French Huguenots, thus using and favoring French techniques and styles. The naturalistic style distinction between English and French designs was short-lived: in 1752-1753 flowers began to again become more stylized, possibly in imitation of French designs.¹⁰⁰

This stylization is clearly visible in the brocaded flowers and white ground flowers. The larger bouquets feature semi-realistic roses whose color alternates between pink and purple in relation to the motif's orientation. The pink roses can clearly be called naturalistic, especially in conjunction with the realistic leaves. However, the purple variation is clearly not inspired by any true color of roses. The daffodils are even more

⁹⁷ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*, 7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁹ Thornton, 118.

¹⁰⁰ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*, 8.

stylized in regards to color: they alternate between pink with purple centers and purple with pink centers—a far cry from all color variations of existing daffodils. The ground patterning of white flowers is stylized both in color and form: the flower resembles a simplified daisy with variations in the number of blooms, sometimes accompanied with buds.

French silk designs were once again solidly imitated by English producers in the 1760s, making the country of origin again difficult to determine.¹⁰¹ Since this fabric does not contain any of the specifically 1760s motifs or sizing, thus dating it slightly earlier, it may in fact point to an origin in France. Contemporary English critics called French silks gaudy in their colorings, and indelicate.¹⁰² The golden-yellow textured ground fabric spotted with pink and purple flowers certainly seems gaudy to today's aesthetic, but would that have been the case when it was originally worn? While yellow was a popularly requested color in the American colonies, in general American customers preferred muted colors.¹⁰³ When versions of the same designs are done in different colors, it is often the case that the brighter color was meant for the European market while the more muted color was meant for America.¹⁰⁴ So if the fabric would not have been seen as gaudy in England, it may have appeared that way in comparison to the relatively pale clothing of Virginia.

Regardless of the country of origin of the fabric, it still sheds light on the person who wore it. William Hogarth, an English artist known for his political satire, wrote that

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 15.

¹⁰³ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

you can “know the very minds of the people by their dress.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, in an era of conspicuous consumption, clothing was the most visible and easily tailored material representation of the image one wished to put forward. This fabric would have been obviously expensive due to the many design techniques incorporated into the weaving, setting the wearer above others by its perceived opulence. Its bold weaving means it also would not have been worn by someone who wanted to blend in or fade into the background, as many Victorian historians have portrayed Martha Washington.¹⁰⁶

Martha owned another yellow brocade from this period of her life (W-3553) (Fig. 10). While the previous fabric has a much more elaborate weave structure, this fabric has more brocading. The design consists of two slightly curvilinear vines flanked by bundles of leaves and flowers. Unlike the ultra-naturalistic florals of the 1740s, those in this fabric are unrealistic both in form and coloring. Both the leaves and the large flowers, visually similar to roses, are portrayed as spiky, a trait common in Chinese silks.¹⁰⁷ However, it lacks other characteristics of Chinese silks, namely three to four design repeats across the width of the fabric, a width of more than twenty-four inches, and holes in the selvedge—the most prevalent way to identify Chinese silks of the period.¹⁰⁸

The bouquets of flowers alternate colors after every repeat, with three variations seen in the largest fragment. The largest flowers, likely roses, alternate between blue, purple, and pink, each with three shades of the color. The upper blooms and berries echo

¹⁰⁵ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty: written with a view of fixing the fluctuating ideas of taste* (London, 1753).

¹⁰⁶ Helen Bryan, *Martha Washington: First Lady of Liberty* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002), ix.

¹⁰⁷ Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 50.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 42.

the colors of the roses. Unlike the additional flowers, the large, spiky leaves flanking the bottom sides of the bouquets are not matched in color: the blue roses are matched with pink leaves, the purple roses are matched with blue leaves, and the pink flowers are matched with purple leaves. Neither the green leaves and stems nor the white, pansy-shaped flowers alternate colors.



Figure 10: Fragment. Silk. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

Unlike the bouquets, which are colored along the shapes of the plants, the pink leaves of the vines are colored in stripes, once again reminiscent of a lampas weave. They are not, however, held in a twill weave. Since the supplementary wefts of the leaves' brocade is carried across to the nearby flowers, it is more likely that the stripes were a cost saving technique and are ordered merely in relation to their placement on the flowers.

Unlike the polychrome brocade, the decorative white floats are continuous, yet still supplementary. The use of undyed, or white, continuous supplementary weft floats is seen on several other of Martha's fabrics. However, this is most likely due to its wide use in weaving rather than a particular proclivity to the style on Martha's part.

While the individual elements of the design—the flowers and leaves—are smaller than life size, the size of the vertical repeat (sixteen inches) likely dates this fabric to the 1750s or 1760s, as vertical repeats rapidly decreased in size after that period. This date frame indicates that Martha likely obtained and wore the fabric during her first marriage or early in her second marriage, before the American Revolution.

All of the fabrics from the period of Martha's first marriage show a very different Martha from the image we have been handed down. Martha Custis, one of the premier ladies of Virginia, fulfilled her role with apparent aplomb. She wore the cutting edge of fashion and technology, staying both on trend with the fawn-colored fabrics and venturing beyond with bold colors and silver brocade.

At this point in her life, the dowdy Martha beloved in the Victorian era would not have fulfilled the expectations of her role as a wealthy planter's wife in the colonial

period, nor allayed her father-in-law's initial fears about her family. The fashionable woman who undoubtedly both fit in and stood out, proved him wrong. In line with fashion, Martha was both wholly Virginian and wholly English, and perfectly projecting her rank.

This period of luxury and relative anonymity was short lived: Daniel Custis died just seven years into their marriage, leaving Martha a wealthy widow at twenty-six. While the change in circumstances could have drastically changed Martha's day-to-day responsibilities, leaving her head of a plantation, it did not change the role for which she was dressing. What did change the role, however, was her marriage to war hero and celebrity George Washington.

SECOND MARRIAGE: A CELEBRITY WEDDING AND BEYOND

Three years later, in 1759, Martha married George Washington, at the time a famous war hero and prominent Virginia planter. When asked to describe Martha Washington in an online survey, the most common response from the American public was “George Washington’s wife,” so it is no surprise that the garment that has received the most attention—and to which the largest selection of fabrics have been attributed—is the dress she wore for their wedding. As discussed, the garment was described as consisting of a petticoat woven with silver, purple shoes with silver trim, and a gown of yellow brocade.¹⁰⁹ Only a single silver brocade carries the claim of being part of the garment (Fig. 11), as does only a single pair of sequined, purple satin pumps (Fig. 12).

The satin pumps are extraordinarily opulent by any standards, and would have stood out greatly in the fashion landscape of colonial America. The body is constructed of a deep purple 4/1 satin weave, which is complemented by ornate silver lace. The top opening, tongue, and buckle straps are edged with silver held in a common gimp pattern, similar to silk trims used to edge gowns. The silver lace on the main body of the shoe is custom shaped to fit and uses several different silver thread techniques to achieve a sense of dimension and shading. Silk thread cores are wrapped in hammered silver of different widths, and strips of hammered silver are used themselves as threads to create a larger

¹⁰⁹ Britannia Wellington Peter Kennon, ca. 1899, MVLA curatorial file, W-2667/A&B.

reflective surface than the wrapped silk. Sequins are also attached to give another element of sparkle.



Figure 11: Fragment. Silk and silver. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

The extravagance of the shoes, combined with their fully intact condition, has garnered them great attention and study. However, the silk may also reveal new details regarding the shoes. Two other fragments of satin of the same color and with the same weave structure exist in the Mount Vernon collection, which could indicate that the shoes were originally made to match a purple silk gown.

The fact that the shoes still exist is certainly an indication that they were very rarely worn. Their extravagance would have made them inappropriate for daily wear and reserved for the most formal occasions. However, the notion these were only worn on the occasion of Martha's second wedding is unlikely, especially if there was another gown matching the shoes.



Figure 12: Shoes. Silk, silver, leather. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

Compared to both the shoes and her other silver brocades, the petticoat now associated with her marriage to George Washington (W-544/E, W-3606) is strikingly plain. However, fabric did not necessarily need to showcase the latest fashionable brocade or bright colors to have been identifiably sumptuous. To the modern eye, the fabric is unassuming: the cream is an unobtrusive color in a relatively simple unbalanced plain weave whose only texture is ribbing provided by thick wefts. However, what appear to be black supplementary weft threads are in fact thinly-hammered strips of silver, now tarnished to black.

Silver was such a rarity in colonial American clothing that its use in any capacity was a definite statement of wealth.¹¹⁰ Though silver could be expected to be seen in large metropolises, such as Boston or Charleston, its presence in Virginia, especially in the country, would have been unique.¹¹¹

Additionally, silver added significant weight to the fabric. This made it more common in men's waistcoats than women's garments, as they used significantly less fabric than any portion of women's garments. This brings some doubt to the provenance of the fabric. However, three separate pieces (two at Mount Vernon and one at Woodlawn) all carry a family provenance of being from one of Martha's gowns rather than one of her husband's waistcoats. Additionally, since petticoats were only a small portion of a gown, and only the visible portion likely would have used the decorative fabric, the weight would not have been unendurably heavy.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating set of fragments in the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association's collection is the tobine striped and brocaded taffeta (W-2784/A-H) (fig. 13). Not only are there a large number of extant pieces, still seemingly cut primarily along the seams of the original gown, but the fabric itself displays virtually every decorative weave at a time when each change in weave structure represented an added cost to the buyer.

While the ground is a simple, celery-green plain weave, there are no wide expanses where the ground is not broken up by more elaborate decorative weaves. The most obvious intrusions are the tobine stripes. The tobine effect is achieved by using

¹¹⁰ Linda Baumgarten, personal interview, March 25, 2014.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

supplementary warps floated over seven ground wefts before being tied down by a single weft.

Colorful flowers on the plain weave stripes are created through brocade and not only change orientation through point repeat, but also use differing colors for the different orientations. While the large, central white flower remains the same, the surrounding flowers change from light and bright pink to purple and grey-pink. This addition of color represents the addition of more supplementary wefts: though the form of the brocaded design remains virtually the same, the same sets of yarns could not be used across every piece.



Figure 13: Clothing fragment. Silk. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

The difficulty of the brocade is increased by the addition of a small amount of point-rentré. Ultra-naturalistic floral designs, favored in the 1740s, were no longer present by the time this design was produced.

In addition to having both tobine stripes and brocade, the fabric also has an additional, subtle floral design made with supplementary weft floats. The floats utilize the bleached, or undyed, very slightly spun weft yarns to make both a serpentine vine (over the widest compilation of tobine stripes), and floral sprigs on the taffeta ground between stripes.

The weft floats over the tobine stripes represent significant skill of behalf of the designer and the weaver. Not only were they utilizing supplementary warp floats to create the tobine texture, they were also floating the ground wefts over the supplementary warp floats in a figural pattern while still managing to use them to tie down the warp floats without interrupting the tobine's texture.

Both the design of the silk and the silk trade itself can be used to fairly accurately date the original production of the textile. The English silk industry, as a whole, declined from 1763 to 1766.¹¹² Seemingly contradictorily, the peak year for silk export to the American colonies was 1764, after which silk exportation never again reached the same volume.¹¹³ The failure of the industry to recover can easily be blamed on both changing fashions and the political climate of America. With the Revolutionary War looming, importation of British goods was protested at various turns: the donning of such an English and luxurious garment could have been interpreted as claiming support for the

¹¹² Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*, 7.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

crown. Apart from the trade complications that arose with the changing political climate, the fashions for textiles changed, bringing printed cottons into vogue.¹¹⁴ In England, court functions still demanded the use of silk, rather than cotton. This practice could have been echoed on the formal occasions in America, explaining Martha's continued importation of silks.¹¹⁵

These dates are significant because the design places the silk amid the recession and the Revolution. While the 1740s into the 1750s were characterized by excessive naturalism as we have seen, they gave way to a formalized mix of rococo and classicism in the 1760s. Silks produced during the beginning of the decade featured a large floral meander as the main design feature, from which sprouted flowers in alternating orientations.¹¹⁶ As the expense of producing intricately figured silks surpassed the price at which they could be sold, designs became formulaic and once again fell back on copying the proven-successful French designs.¹¹⁷

While the designs of the mid-1760s to the early 1770s were by no means identical, the basic formula included a serpentine vine and clusters of carnations and roses, both of which are present in this fabric.¹¹⁸ As neoclassicism took hold in other forms of decorative art and design, it manifested itself into silk designs in the form of straight stripes.¹¹⁹ While initially playing only a background role, they eventually came to dominate designs. Before their complete takeover in the mid-1770s, stripes joined the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Thornton, 130.

¹¹⁷ Rothstein, 9.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Thornton, 130.

meander as the main design feature: the meander trailed up the stripe like a trellis, which is seen in this fabric.¹²⁰

By the mid-1770s, meanders virtually disappear—completely overtaken by straight stripes.¹²¹ While the meander is still present in this fabric, it is subtly rendered in translucent white. The subtleness of the meander accompanied with the boldness of the stripes and the presence of all the formulaic elements seen in transitional silks most likely dates it toward the end of the transition from pure rococo to pure neoclassicism, or from about the late 1760s to early 1770s. This is supported by comparing it to extremely similar fabrics produced in England from the same period.

These dates represent the latest possible time to import silks before the Revolution. It places the silk well after peak importation, when new silks were less common than they had been in the past. This does not necessarily indicate that it was an unfashionable holdout that would have been out of place amid yards of printed cotton, but its relative rarity would have further highlighted the sumptuous tastes of the wearer.

Even more fascinating than the fabric is the shape of the fragments. Many clearly point to a specific usage within the bodice of a gown. However, they present a contradictory image.

The shape of fragment W-2784 indicates that it likely was one of the sleeves of the garment (Fig. 14). The curvilinear left edge bears evidence of a seam, and fits the shape needed to make a rounded sleeve with slight gathering and an orientation loosely parallel to the bodice (as we see in standard garments from that period of production).

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

The orientation of the stripes are such that when the arm was held down, in a resting position, the stripes would be perpendicular to those in the bodice and skirt of the garment. Though different from later styles, this seems to be standard for striped gowns during the eighteenth century. Except for those reconstructed in the next century, virtually every extant striped gown, bodice, and jacket bear horizontal stripes around the sleeve with vertical stripes on the bodice and skirt. The choice was stylistic rather than structural: even gowns with printed or embroidered stripes have them running around the sleeves rather than down them.

While a sleeve cut in the prevailing fashion of the day is hardly tantalizing or surprising information, what makes the collection unique is the presence of four potential bodice pieces, all of which represent different styles of bodices, and none of which fit together with regards to measurements. It is improbable that the gown was remade five times without utilizing the bodice pieces, as the fabric would have been needed in the new constructions.

The piece that would accommodate the largest person is W-2784/C. In the shape of a stomacher, it is also chronologically the oldest style of the potential bodice fronts. Stomachers were the primary method of closure for fashionable bodices throughout most of the eighteenth century. The shape of this fragment matches that of an extant stomacher in the Victoria & Albert collection dated between 1750 and 1775, likely meaning it was cut very shortly after the fabric's production.¹²²

¹²² Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 1: Englishwomen's dresses and their construction* (Drama Publishing, 1977), 29.

Another fragment, W-2784/B (Fig. 14), appears to be the right side of a center-front closure bodice, a style that appeared in the 1760s. This would also place this cut near the date of the fabric's weaving, however, center-front closures continued to be in fashion through the end of the century, which allows for this cut possibly to have been made later than the stomacher.

Both W-2784/B and W-2784/G (Fig. 15) show evidence of buttons: W-2784/B has threads that appear to have held buttons while W-2784/G has buttonholes (figs. 14 and 15). While they are from opposing sides of the bodice, neither their measurements nor their button placements match. The presence of buttons could either indicate that the gown had a center-front closure with buttons, a rarity, or that it had a transitional buttoning stomacher, called a compere. These false stomachers were sewn into the rest of the bodice, with the true opening down the center front rather than along the sides of the stomacher.¹²³ This type of bodice opening was in fashion in the 1770s and 1780s, meaning that it was in fashion concurrently with the other styles.¹²⁴ However, both pieces are slightly too wide to have been used as a compere: the width is closer to what would be likely if the pieces extended to the side seams of the bodice.

¹²³ Baumgarten, 219.

¹²⁴ Ibid.



Figure 14: Fragment. Silk. Mount Vernon Ladies Association.

Another unique aspect of W-2784/G is what appears to be a straight waistline. However, there is no evidence of stitch lines, so it is possible that the straight cut was not made along the actual waistline of the garment. It could be that the fabric was being repurposed into a boy's waistcoat, which would have sported a straight hem by the end of the century.



Figure 15: Fragment. Silk. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

Aside from the closure, W-2784/B shows evidence of two parallel, serpentine stitch lines, likely from applied decoration. This applied decoration was likely constructed out of the same fabric as the body of the gown (called self-decoration). The serpentine pattern was relatively new at the time of the fabric's weaving; it came into

fashion around the 1750s and 1760s, starting first on the skirt.¹²⁵ The small scale of the silk design was complemented by the applied decoration, rather than interrupted, as earlier, larger designs would have been.¹²⁶

As stated, it is unlikely that each of these bodice pieces represents a full, separate gown, as the other pieces would have needed to be utilized to finish the garment. However, it could indicate an interrupted attempt at remaking the garment. It could be that the garment was being remade or resized for Martha herself or for her daughter Patsy (Martha Parke Custis). The dates of the bodice cuts correspond roughly to the date of Patsy's death in 1773, which could have given halt to the alterations.

Another extremely similar fabric from the period also exists in Mount Vernon's collection. Similar in both design, color, and technique to the previous fabric, this is also a fragment of a bodice. However, this piece is from the back of the garment (showing us at the very least that the gown was a robe à l'anglaise, a dress with a fitted back). While the previous fabric features tobine stripes between large sections of plain weave, the ground of this fabric is composed almost entirely of tobine stripes. Small white weft floats create a subtle meandering vine over a thin red stripe, and symmetrical bunches of naturalistic roses and tulips are placed over triple blue stripes. The formal symmetry of the design falls in line with the newly emerging neoclassicism of the late 1760s and early 1770s, placing the fabric around the same date as, and perhaps slightly later than, the previous one.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

The mantua maker who constructed the garment was careful to line up the stripes along the center seam, forming a “V” shape. This immaculate attention to detail was not always seen in the period, and is likely an indication that the fragment is from the original construction as remaking the garment would usually not allow for such detail. Oddly, the seams at the shoulder seem to suggest otherwise: most often, the piece of the bodice covering the shoulder was cut as one with the back of the bodice, the seam falling in the front. The seam placement in the back may suggest that the bodice was altered or that creative piecing techniques were used.

Robes à l’anglaises were considered less formal than robes à la françaises, which had fabric falling from the shoulders loosely down the back rather than fitted close to the body, but the fabric of this gown would have set the gown apart from informal wear. Especially as war loomed and political strife became prominent, wearing a new, fashionable silk could have stood out as a definite statement on the part of the wearer. As the fashion landscape changed to favor printed cottons, this silk would only have been appropriate for more formal occasions. While it still would have been too informal for court wear, this would not have been a concern in colonial Virginia.

There is no question of the prevalence of stripes in fashion during this period. Many of Martha’s gowns play into this fashion, with another fabric being no exception (Fig. 16). A large number of fragments from this gown exist in Mount Vernon’s collection,¹²⁷ with another piece at Woodlawn, the home of Martha’s granddaughter, Nelly.

¹²⁷ Seven in all: W-544/B, W-584/E, W-639/A, W-1119, W-2370/A, W-2780/A, W-3050.



Figure 16: Fragment. Silk. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

The design of the fabric is done by alternating stripes of supplementary warp floats in a tobine weave and stripes of satin with supplementary weft floral vines. The tobine creates the illusion of ribbon by floating supplementary warps over seven ground wefts (held in a plain weave) with a single weft tying down the floats. This technique gives the area the ribbed appearance of some ribbon weaves without causing the interim white stripes to also be ribbed. Furthering this illusion is a one-sixteenth-inch wide sky blue satin-woven stripe separating the two motif areas. The white area features a vine of

light and dark greens with blue-petaled flowers with purple centers and yellow highlights done in continuous supplementary weft floats. The overall design repeat is incredibly small, which was typical of styles post-1760: each stripe is only eleventh-sixteenths of an inch wide, making for a total width repeat of one and one-eighth inches. The height of the straight repeat is only 1 ¼ inches. This small repeat is diminutive even for the stylistic period. The majority of designs during the 1760s repeated every eight to nine inches in height, which shrunk in the 1770s to a mere two to three inches in height.¹²⁸

Starting in 1764, designs began to shrink because smaller designs were cheaper to produce and could be made without as much skill and thus by a wider range of weavers.¹²⁹ This did not necessarily mean, however, that the fabrics themselves were cheap. The weaving process was still incredibly slow and complicated, and the material alone was costly. Raw silk was not produced in England so had to be imported from across the globe.¹³⁰

Silk gowns could cost from £10 to over £60 domestically in a period where a wealthy merchant's house cost around £500.¹³¹ American colonists had to add to that price the cost of shipping and the fees of their agents in England. They also had to pay duties on the imported goods; while duties for silk were lowered in 1722, they still existed.¹³² As mentioned above, the article devoted to silk design in *Laboratory or School of Arts* (1756) instructed the designer to “keep the number of shuttles or the workmanship

¹²⁸ Natalie Rothstein, *The Victoria & Albert Museum's Textile Collection: Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850* (New York: Canopy Books, 1994), 10.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁰ Peter Thornton *Baroque and Rococo Silks* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), 80.

¹³¹ Thornton, 80.

¹³² Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*, 9.

as low as possibly he can, except it be in very rich stuffs, where the price of workmanship is not minded.”¹³³

Around the same time that patterns began to shrink, stripes began to appear in silk designs, likely as a way of keeping the workmanship low while still giving the silk a multicolored design.¹³⁴ Though they started in the background of designs early in the 1760s, by the end of the decade they had become more prominent.¹³⁵ Stripes stayed in fashion for a significant amount of time: the *Magasin des Modes*, a fashion magazine that featured prints of the latest styles, showed vertical, two-colored stripes on clothing for both genders.¹³⁶ Trade relations between the American colonies and England once again help us narrow down the likely time period of construction. From 1776 to 1783, virtually no silks were sent to America, meaning hers was likely made before 1776.¹³⁷

A complete garment made from an extremely similar fabric exists in the collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute. There are subtle differences: the flowers on the gown are identifiable as roses and sometimes overstep the border into the colored stripes, and there is no thin colored band separating the two stripes. However, the weave structure is the same, with tobine weave contrasting with satin weave.¹³⁸ The most notable difference between the two is the color: while the dress, which has a French provenance,¹³⁹ is sky blue, Martha Washington’s gown was scarlet. This is unusual due to

¹³³ Qtd in Ibid.

¹³⁴ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*, 9.

¹³⁵ Thornton, 130.

¹³⁶ Tamami Suoh, “18th Century,” in The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute, *Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2006), 62.

¹³⁷ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*, 10.

¹³⁸ Kyoto Costume Institute, “Dress (‘robe à la française’),” *KCI Digital Archives*, http://www.kci.or.jp/archives/digital_archives/detail_19_e.html.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Americans' preference for muted colors.¹⁴⁰ The French origin of the Kyoto gown does raise questions as to the country of origin for Martha Washington's fabric. Since French designs were once again actively being reproduced in England by the 1760s,¹⁴¹ the design alone cannot be used to definitely place the origin of the fabric. However, the simplicity of the flowers in Martha's fabric in comparison to the French example could point to English origin. Regardless of the actual origin of the fabric, wearing something with a clear French influence could have been a conscious statement by Martha in regards to our alliance with the French during the American Revolution.

What is most remarkable about this set of fragments is what they can tell us about the construction of the original garment. While many fragments of both this fabric and others in the collection were cut to miniscule sizes to fit into frames or be used as bookmarks, a few pieces of this fabric remain as full panels of the dress.

For example, fragment W-639/A consists of the entire front left skirt panel. The piece goes from the top of the skirt where it connected to the bodice to the hem, which is still intact. The height of forty inches corresponds to Martha's height of approximately five feet tall. Both the bottom edge and right edge (which would have been the front opening of the gown) are finished with tape hems using warp-faced plain-woven linen tape. The hem is secured in running stitches with red thread. Though the total width of the fabric selvedge to selvedge is nineteen inches, the top edge is pleated in such a way as to take it down to 8-3/8 inches wide. This is done through a series of knife pleats that start wide at the front (one inch deep with a 1/4-inch overlap) and become thinner toward

¹⁴⁰ Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain from 1750-1850*, 8.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

the back (½-inch deep with ¼-inch overlap). The left edge of the fabric is pressed back and basted to make an opening for a pocket. These pleat widths help us place a second fragment, W-2370/A, toward the back of the skirt since the pleats across the top of that fragment match the width of those furthest from the front opening.

Fragment W-1119 was originally thought to have been taken from the sleeve opening of the bodice, but the angle of the opening would have been too small for any arm larger than a child's. Since the threads present in the seams of this piece match those in the large skirt panel, it can be deduced that the piece was not taken down to fit a child, which means that the piece must have come from a different area of the dress. The round, removed section has a diameter of four inches—similar in size and shape to what would have been need to make a pincushion (a popular craft project seen utilizing the Washingtons' wardrobe)—which may explain the supposed “arm hole.” One edge of the fragment is pressed into knife pleats that are ¾-inch deep with a ¼-inch overlap. The significant bulk of the fabric pressed underneath would be too thick to be part of the skirt, which may suggest that this piece was originally taken from the top center back of a robe à la française. If this is indeed the case, the garment in the Kyoto Costume Institute's collection could give us an idea of how the completed garment would have looked.

As opposed to the stripes seen above, unpatterned silk is difficult to catalogue and a rare survival. Since the dating of fabric by weaving technology is so broad (and virtually undetectable in unpatterned weaves), the fabric's design is the most helpful for precisely, or even broadly, dating the fabric. Further, since unpatterned fabrics are so unextraordinary, they are not often saved.

When the fabric of a piece cannot be used to determine its date, the most helpful marker for dating it is the cut of the garment. In the case of fragments W-2152/A-D (fig. 17), this remains difficult. Only three pieces remain sized for Martha: the center back, with the attached shoulders, the left front of the bodice, and an abstractly cut piece which may be from a sleeve.



Figure 17: Clothing fragments. Silk, linen. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

The back piece tells us that the gown was a robe à l'Anglaise, along with giving us some details of the garment's construction. As was common, the bodice was lined in linen and held together with running stitches. Slightly unusual is the piping around the

sleeve openings that acted as reinforcement. While it may have been used during the period, it is not common in survivals. The bodice was boned, with boning still present on either side of the center-back seams and two lateral back seams (along which the fragment is cut). These seams are reinforced with binding stitches in thread dyed to match the outer fabric, as opposed to the lining.

The front bodice piece shows a center front closure held with a lace, evidenced by the row of eyelets in the lining (Fig. 18). This dates the garment's construction to after the 1760s. Since the bottom of the bodice is not straight across, it likely dates before the 1790s.

What is most useful for dating the garment, and thus the fabric, is the small bodice front, sized for an infant (Fig. 19). The tiny fragment contains the front left of the bodice with a section of the connected skirt. It shows the same construction techniques as the larger bodice fragments, except that instead of eyelets for laces, it has buttonholes. According to adult fashions, this would date the piece to around the 1760s, consistent with the dating of the larger garment.

This is unusual in several ways. By the 1760s, child rearing had changed dramatically from prior decades. Thanks mostly to the teachings of John Locke and Jean-Jacque Rousseau, children were no longer dressed as miniature adults, but instead wore specialized, more practical garments.¹⁴² The adult fashion and expensive fabric of the garment may suggest that it was used as a christening gown. Linda Baumgarten, costume historian at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, surmised that this was unlikely: no

¹⁴² Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth Century Europe, 1715-1780*, 162.

surviving complete christening gown has buttons, as did this garment.¹⁴³ Instead, they opted for laces, as we see in the adult garment of this fragment collection.¹⁴⁴

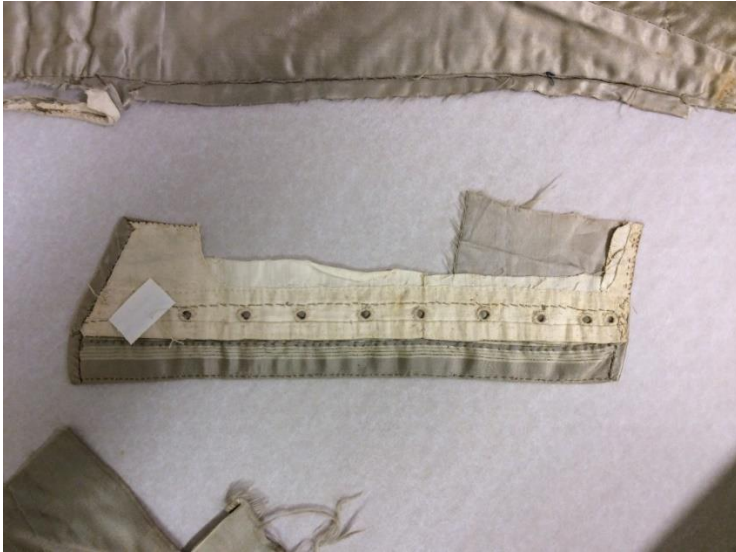


Figure 18: Bodice fragment. Silk, linen. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.



Figure 19: Child's bodice fragment. Silk, linen. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

¹⁴³ Linda Baumgarten, personal interview, March 25, 2013.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

She also suggested that the infant bodice could be used to date when Martha ceased wearing the garment, as the smaller infant gown was likely cut from the larger adult gown.¹⁴⁵ This would place the gown firmly in the 1760s, as both the adult and infant bodices point to that date. However, the thread used for constructing the garments may contradict this assumption. The darker thread used to stitch the hems and to reinforce the boning on the back of the adult bodice is the same thread used to stitch the hems and to make the buttonholes on the infant's garment. This suggests that the garments were made at the same time—or at least with the same spool of the thread. If the garments were indeed made at the same time, it could give us some insight into the personality of Martha and her parenting style, as it suggests that she commissioned matching garments for herself and her grandchildren.

Another interesting aspect of this series of fragments is their similarity to the garment Martha is shown wearing in the Edward Savage portrait, *The Washington Family* (Fig. 20). Not only is the gown the same color, it has a center front closure (possibly held with laces) and is a robe à l'Anglaise. While an interesting comparison, it is by no means definitive, as it was common practice to leave a textile's pattern out of portraits in order to allow the clothes to appear fashionable longer. It is also possible that the gown shown in the portrait is entirely conjectural. In the early part of her second marriage, Martha remained extremely fashionable. Her clothing fabrics from this period represent the height of fashion. The silver brocades were some of the most expensive fabrics that would have been seen in Virginia, and the others are at the expensive end of the range of

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

fashionable fabrics available at the time. Her role as Washington's wife continued to warrant fashionable dress and displays of wealth, but with the American Revolution that would soon change. With all eyes on the Washingtons, Martha took a step away from her place at the pinnacle of fashion, choosing instead to use her clothing as political statements.



Figure 20: Edward Savage, The Washington Family. Oil on Canvas. 1789-1796. National Gallery of Art.

REVOLUTION: A CONSCIOUS ABANDONMENT OF FASHION

In 1776, the American colonies officially declared independence from England. George Washington had already been declared Commander of the Continental Army more than a year earlier on June 19, 1775. Martha was now not only the wife of a wealthy planter but of a leader of the American independence effort.

Almost all of Martha's surviving clothing dates to the part of her life before she was deemed historically relevant. While this unfortunately means that not many physical tokens exist of her wardrobe during the American Revolution and George Washington's presidency, their absence is overcome by the presence of written descriptions, which are entirely nonexistent during the first part of her life. From these descriptions, we find that instead of the silver brocades and colorful silks of her private life, her public persona was plainly dressed—closer to the popular image of Martha Washington that prevails today than her previous wardrobe.

During the American Revolution, Martha Washington spent winters with George in New York, notably at Valley Forge. There, she supported the war effort of her husband: hosting officers and their wives, raising the spirits of the troops, and serving as a rallying point for nonmilitary patriots. She essentially became the archetype for the ideal woman of the Enlightenment: modest, domestic, nurturing, and open.

The most effective way of demonstrating this was through her clothing. The earliest detailed description of Martha's clothing came from Elizabeth Schuyler

Hamilton, the wife of Alexander Hamilton. As we unfortunately know, the mundane facts of everyday life are often not considered worth recording, so the fact that Martha's clothing was remarkable enough to record tells us that her switch to plain, understated clothing was effective. Elizabeth Hamilton stated exactly that when she remarked that Martha was "very plainly dressed for such a grand lady as I considered her."¹⁴⁶

This strikingly plain ensemble consisted of "a plain, brown gown [made of] homespun stuff, a large white handkerchief, a neat cap, and her plain gold wedding ring..."¹⁴⁷ The "homespun stuff" noted as the gown's material is especially significant. Martha was not simply trading floral designs and stripes for non-patterned fabrics of the same visible quality, she had completely changed the material from imported silks and finely woven cottons to wool ("stuff") produced in America. As mentioned previously, despite the consistent demand for wool clothing fabrics in American storefronts, they were not considered fashionable. Further, imported wool fabrics could be produced at lower costs and higher quality than in America, where fabric was produced at a much smaller scale. Thus, this change could only be ascribed to a conscious decision on Martha's part and not an attempt to save money.

Had saving money or nonimportation been Martha's sole goal, continuing to wear clothing she already owned—regardless of its splendor—would have more effectively fulfilled that goal. Her true goal must therefore have been visually separating herself from England and ensuring that people absolutely knew that she subscribed to nonimportation.

¹⁴⁶ Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, qtd. in Howard, 147.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

It is interesting to note that Martha did not cease ordering luxurious clothing from England during the initial nonimportation protests by American colonists. As late as 1768, she was placing orders for “handsome grane Winter Silk (but not yellow) . . . to be made into a saque and a coat” along with “a green satin quilted coat” and “two handsome stomachers, with sleeve knots made of ribbons,” a decided contrast to the plain, brown homespun gown of 1779.¹⁴⁸

By the 1760s, Martha would not have been unfamiliar with the idea of wearing American-produced fabrics as a means of protesting English taxation. During “the time of uneasiness,” after the Stamp Act was enacted in 1765, Francis Fauquier reported that the wives of planters had begun producing cotton cloth for both clothing and coverlets.¹⁴⁹ He also mentioned that while they attempted to make Osnabrigs, the rough cloth used for slave clothing, the effort did not last as importing was far cheaper.¹⁵⁰

Public praise for this feminine attempt at colonial patriotism would no doubt have reached Martha in the years before the Revolution. Though the propagandistic lauding of women who shunned fashion and luxury for the simplicity and industriousness that was needed to end economic dependence on England was far more prevalent in the New England colonies, it was not entirely absent in Virginia. In December of 1769, a “homespun ball” was thrown in Williamsburg, VA at which attendees wore American-produced fabric. The Virginia Gazette wrote:

It is with greatest pleasure we inform our readers that the same patriotic spirit which gave rise to the association of the Gentlemen on a late event,

¹⁴⁸ George Washington, 18-19 June, 1768, in John C. Fitzpatrick, *The Diaries of George Washington, 1748-1799* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), 273.

¹⁴⁹ Francis Fauquier to the Board to Trade, 17 December, 1766, PROCO/5 1345, 176-177.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

was most agreeably manifested in the dress of the Ladies on this occasion, who, to the number of near one hundred, appeared in homespun gowns; a lively and striking instance of their acquiescence and concurrence in whatever may be the true and essential interest of their country. It were to be wished that all assemblies of American Ladies would exhibit a like example of public service and private oeconomy, [sic] so amiably united.¹⁵¹

According to his cash accounts, George Washington paid £1 for entrance to the “Subscription Ball at [the] Capitol.”¹⁵² Martha and her children were either staying nearby at Eltham, or with George in Williamsburg, where he had a private room rented at Mrs. Campbell’s, and while he does not directly mention whether or not they attended the ball with him, it is unlikely that Martha would have missed attending such a large and prominent social event.¹⁵³

Although this event may have marked the beginning of Martha’s wardrobe shift, it did not mark a dramatic change: she continued to order—and presumably wear—luxury clothing textiles from England for the next four years. This was despite the fact that in May 1769 the Virginia Burgesses, of which George Washington was a member, unanimously agreed to cease importation of various goods until the Townshend Acts, which taxed tea, paper, and glass, were completely repealed.¹⁵⁴ Among the items they agreed not to import were “Ribbon and Millinery of all Sorts, *India* Goods of all Sorts, ... Silks of all Sorts, ... Cambrick, Lawn, Muslin, Gauze, ... Callico or Cotton Stuffs ...

¹⁵¹ *Virginia Gazette*, 14 December, 1769, 2.

¹⁵² George Washington, “Cash Accounts, December 1769,” in W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig, ed., *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, vol. 8, 24 June, 1767-25 December, 1771 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 267-270.

¹⁵³ George Washington, “December 1769,” in Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington*, vol. 2, 14 January, 1766-31 December, 1770 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 199-204.

¹⁵⁴ “Virginia Nonimportation Resolutions, 17 May, 1769,” in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 27-31.

Linens, ... Woollens, Worsted Stuff, ... Broad Cloths ... Narrow Cloths ... Hats, [and] Stockings.”¹⁵⁵

Washington mentioned his agreement to his factor in London, Robert Cary & Company in his next order, stating, “I have very heartily entered into an Association ... not to import any Article which now is, or hereafter shall be Taxed for this purpose until the said Act or Acts and are repealed. I am therefore particular in mentioning this matter as I am fully determined to adhere religiously to it...”¹⁵⁶ In the next few orders, we see the Washingtons carefully choosing what they imported, staying below the agreed upon prices and avoided banned items.¹⁵⁷ The only exceptions were a satin bonnet and satin pumps.¹⁵⁸

The aforementioned homespun ball took place during this period of strict Virginian nonimportation, but the initial movement, or at least the Washingtons’ adherence to it, was short lived. In their order on August 20, 1770, they included items that contradicted the nonimportation agreement to be purchased only on the condition that the Townshend Acts were repealed—that way the order would be filled as quickly as possible.¹⁵⁹ By December 3, 1771, just under a year after the ball, the Washingtons were

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ George Washington to Robert Cary & Company, Mount Vernon, July 25, 1769, in Theodore J. Crackel, ed., *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008), <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-02-08-02-0158-0001>, accessed October 31, 2013.

¹⁵⁷ See George Washington to Robert Cary & Company, July 25, 1769, August 20, 1770, and July 18, 1771 in Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-02-08-02-0248-0001>, accessed October 31, 2013.

¹⁵⁹ George Washington to Robert Cary & Company, Mount Vernon, August 20, 1770, in Ibid.

again importing items in contrast to the agreement.¹⁶⁰ The clothing imports included “10 yds of Pea Green Lustring,” six pairs of women’s shoes of various fabrics, “Buckram & Stays ... A White Sattin Cloke trimd with edging, A Plain Bonnett, A Stoma[che]r & Sleeve knots [three sets were ordered], A Smart Cap,” two pairs of women’s gloves and mitts in purple kid leather, four pairs in green kid leather, sixteen pairs of women’s hose of various types, ten yards of fine “sprigd & stripd” muslin, and twenty superfine handkerchiefs with “Purple Chinese Borders.”¹⁶¹

The orders remained strong: July 15, 1772, they ordered Mazarine blue India Paduasoy (a heavy corded silk), a white satin quilted coat, “fine & well fancied India Chintz of the bordered kind,” two lace caps, “one to wear in dress, the other with a Night gown,” two patent net handkerchiefs with matching hoods, fifteen yards of fashionable ribbon, trimmings for gown, a blue satin bonnet, a pair of stays, ten pairs of mitts (in white and purple kid leather and white silk), five pairs of gloves (in white kid leather and white silk), six pairs of women’s hose, thirteen pairs of women’s shoes, and one pair of clogs.¹⁶²

At this point, the Washingtons must have felt confident that trade with England would remain strong: Martha sent one of her well-fitting shoes to England “to save the trouble of sendg a Mea[sur] evy yr.”¹⁶³ Unfortunately, the shoe was only used to measure one more order: the Washingtons’ last order for goods through Robert Cary & Co. was

¹⁶⁰ “Invoice of Cost & Charges of Goods Ship’d on Board the Trimley James Page Comr for Virginia upon the Account & Risque of Colo. George Washington & to him Consignd,” London, December 2, 1771, in Ibid. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-02-08-02-0366>, accessed October 31, 2013.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² George Washington, “Invoice to Robert Cary & Company,” July 15, 1772, in Ibid. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-02-09-02-0050-0002>, accessed October 31, 2013.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

placed on July 10, 1773.¹⁶⁴ It is unclear whether they realized at the time that it would be their last order. The order was not particularly large, which may have suggested stocking up in preparation for nonimportation, but there are several reasons besides simply not knowing they would cease importation that would have inspired the Washingtons not to have placed an extravagant order.

The only clothing ordered for Martha was a “Black Silk Sacque & Coat propr for Second Mourning,” a set of fashionable linen accessories (sleeve ruffles, a neckerchief, and two caps), and “A White Silk Bonnett.”¹⁶⁵ Martha’s daughter, Martha Parke Custis, had recently died of epilepsy, sending the family into mourning, a state that was expressed through clothing and thus dictated what the family wore. Though her orders of shoes, gloves and mitts remained strong—thirteen pairs of shoes “p[e]r [the] Measure send last year,” six pairs of gloves, and ten pairs of mitts—they were more understated than her previous specifications.¹⁶⁶ Instead of purple or green, all the gloves and mitts were white, and all the shoes were black, save one pair of white, and were made with smaller heels than the previous year.¹⁶⁷

Their last order, while showing a trend toward understatement, was still imported—a trait that would have been obvious to the common observer, as evidenced by Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton specifically noting that the brown wool gown Martha wore at Valley Forge was “homespun.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ George Washington, “Invoice to Robert Cary & Company,” July 10, 1773, in *Ibid.* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-02-09-02-0204-0002>, accessed October 31, 2013.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, in Howard, 147.

By the Revolution, domestic cloth production in America had increased from what Andrew Burnaby called “very inconsiderable” and “nothing to deserve attention” in 1759.¹⁶⁹ In 1779, Thomas Anburey wrote that Virginia-produced cotton fabric was “little inferior to that made at Manchester” and that “almost all the families in this Province [near Charlottesville], both male and female, are cloathed with their own manufacture, the superior class as an example to their inferiors, who are compelled by necessity.”¹⁷⁰

The progress of manufacturing fabric in America seems to have been focused on cotton: often it was the only type of fabric mentioned. When others were mentioned, they were not as highly praised. Thomas Jefferson, writing to Brissot de Warville in 1787, said that “[homespun] cotton will bear some comparison with the same kinds of manufacture in Europe; but those of wool, flax and hemp are very coarse, unsightly, and unpleasant.”¹⁷¹

If Jefferson’s comment about American-produced wool was true throughout the colonies, not only would Martha’s gown have been less fashionable than her previous garments, it would have been “unsightly and unpleasant” by Jefferson’s standards. Even if Jefferson’s observation was not true about her particular fabric, the wool was coarse enough for Mrs. Hamilton to be able to comment on its origins.

By the time Martha was present at Valley Forge, she was undoubtedly distinctly aware of her influence on the American public. Not only was she a member of the upper class—both beseeched to or praised for influencing the lower classes—she was the wife

¹⁶⁹ Andrew Burnaby, *Travels Through the Middle Settlements in North-America* (London, 1775), 15.

¹⁷⁰ Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America* vol. 2 (London: 1789), 426.

¹⁷¹ Thomas Jefferson to Brissot de Warville, Paris, 16 August, 1786, in Julian P. Boy, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* vol. 10 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1954), 262.

of the famous general. At the very least, having a ship named for her, a schooner called the Lady Washington, would have made her aware of her influence.

This change in dress was no mere façade Martha donned only for public appearances. Two years later, in 1782, Claude Blanchard noted that during his visit to Mount Vernon, Martha “was dressed very plainly and her manners were simple in all respects.”¹⁷² He does not deem these traits negative: he classifies her appearance as “respectable.”¹⁷³

It is clear that during this period, Martha made a concerted effort to project a tailored image. She succeeded so completely that centuries later it is still the image of Martha Washington taught to young Americans. Her move away from imported goods and conscious visual adoption of domestic products worked to inspire the people who watched her and used her as a role model. With the end of the Revolution, the eyes of America did not stray from Martha: they continued to look to her to set the standard for the new American image as the wife of its first sovereign.

With the advent of the new nation in 1783 came the need to establish a new type of ruler. If a monarch was, in European practice, the physical embodiment of a nation, the Washingtons needed to physically represent the intricacies of the new America. Instead of impressing upon foreign visitors and domestic citizens America’s wealth and strength, they needed to impart a message of enlightenment virtues while retaining the respect of foreign dignitaries used to opulent European courts. Martha balanced these goals seamlessly. Abigail Adams, who had experienced the courts of France and England with

¹⁷² Claude Blanchard, July 20, 1782, in Gilbert Chinard, ed., *George Washington as the French Knew Him: A Collection of Texts* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 67.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

her husband, said that she “found myself much more deeply impressed than I ever did before their Majesties of Britain” with feelings of veneration and respect for Martha.¹⁷⁴

Martha walked this fine line by continuing to wear exceptionally plain, unadorned clothing that was constructed of visibly expensive material. The letters that describe Martha’s clothing show her wearing satin, a fabric appropriate for a national court; those same letters, however, always pointed out that whatever she was wearing was plain. Adams put it perfectly when she said, “[Martha Washington] is plain in her dress, but that plainness is the best of every article.”¹⁷⁵

In 1788, Olney Winsor described Martha as “an elegant figure for a person of her years,”¹⁷⁶ an introduction that told the reader that his assessment was positive. “She was dressed in a plain black Sattin [sic] gown, with long Sleeves [sic], figured Lawn Apron & Hand[kerchie]f, guaze [sic] French night Cap with black bowes [sic]—all very neat—but not gaudy [sic]—”¹⁷⁷ This plainness was seen as a positive to Americans, who claimed it spoke to the industry, modesty, and character of its wearer. On her visit to one of Martha’s official levees, a holdover from European courts in which guests are presented to the queen (or in this case the president’s wife), Charlotte Chambers compared Martha to the wives of dignitaries:

She was dressed in a rich silk, but entirely without ornament, except the animation her amiable heart gives to her countenance. Next her were seated the wives of the foreign ambassadors, glittering from the floor to the

¹⁷⁴ Abigail Adams to her sister, July 12, 1789, in *New Letters of Abigail Adams*, 15.

¹⁷⁵ Abigail Adams to her sister, June 28, 1789, in Stewart Mitchell, ed., *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 13.

¹⁷⁶ Olney Winsor to Mrs. Olney Winsor, March 31, 1788, in John P. Kaminski and Gaspare J. Saladino, ed., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* vol. 8 (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1988), 523.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

summit of their headdress. One of the ladies wore three large ostrich-feathers. Her brow was encircled by a sparkling fillet of diamonds; her neck and arms were almost covered with jewels, and two watches were suspended from her girdle, and all reflecting the light from a hundred directions. Such superabundance of ornament struck me as injudicious; we look too much at the gold and pearls to do justice to the lady. However, it may not be in conformity to their individual taste thus decorating themselves, but to honor the country they represent...¹⁷⁸

Chambers to some extent recognized the difficulty in choosing clothing as a representative of a nation. Since the women represented nations who valued visible representations of wealth, they had to dress as such. The new America was ostensibly a meritocracy with no basis in birth or personal wealth, and visible displays of wealth would have contradicted those values.

Though she wore unpretentious and minimally accessorized ensembles, the fabric itself was not always strictly without design—three striped silk fabrics exist from this period. Two are extremely similar: of the same colors and similar scales, the fabrics could have been part of the same ensemble (Figs. 21 and 22). The first fabric, in the collection of Mount Vernon, consists of broad brown and (slightly faded) maroon stripes with a tiny, white vine and berries made with continuous weft floats in the maroon section. The other fabric, in a keepsake sewing case made from fragments of Martha’s clothing, has thin stripes in nearly the same colors as Mount Vernon’s piece, but does not have any figuring. While these fabrics were expensive and were not strictly “plain,” they were not

¹⁷⁸ Charlotte Chambers to Mrs. James Chambers, Philadelphia, February 25, 1795, in *Washington After the Revolution*, 299-301.

ostentatious, and had they been worn without an abundance of accessories, would still have fit well into the image Martha was cultivating.



Figure 21: Clothing fragment. Silk. Mount Vernon Ladies Association.



Figure 22: Sewing Case. Silk, linen, paperboard, wool, steel. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

One of the only surviving gowns worn by Martha effectively illustrates the mode of elegant plainness she cultivated as First Lady (Fig. 23). It is made of brown satin and was apparently cut in a style Martha particularly favored as she is both described and painted wearing gowns of the same cut in different colors. These gowns are unique due to the three straps across their bodices. While this was not an extremely unusual style, it is not the standard in survivals or portraits. A transitional style, it combined the looks of stomacher-fronted and center-front-closure bodices: a transition that peaked in the 1760s. However, the cut of the sleeves and waistline place the garment later in the 1780s or 1790s.

It was in 1799, during her husband's retirement and months before his death, that Martha was described wearing another dress with the bodice straps. Joshua Brookes noted her as "dressed in a Mazareen blue satin gown with three belts over her handkerchief across the body," accessorizing with only "a loose cap, [and her] hair combed straight."¹⁷⁹ Mazareen blue is a dark, vibrant blue, likely named for the color of a Mazareen Blue butterfly.

¹⁷⁹ R.W.G. Vail, ed., "A Dinner at Mount Vernon: From the Unpublished Journal of Joshua Brookes (1773-1859)," *The New-York Historical Society Quarterly* (April 1947): 74-75.



Figure 23: Gown. Silk. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.



Figure 24: Charles Wilson Peale, Martha (Dandridge) Custis Washington. Oil on canvas. 1795. Virginia Historical Society.

A third gown in this style was a cream color, similar to the one she wore in *The Washington Family* (Fig. 21). The portrait, by Charles Wilson Peale, clearly shows the three straps across the front, fastened with buttons at the center (Fig. 24). Like the written description, the straps are “over her handkerchief [and] across the body,” showing a consistency of wear. While the gown in the painting is interesting because it resembles a style corroborated in both written description and extant examples, since it is in a painting, it may never have existed. Peale may have modeled the gown realistically from one Martha wore, may have altered the color while she wore the brown or blue example, or may have made the garment up altogether. Since Martha did in fact own gowns with the strap detail and wore them in the same manner (over her handkerchief), and the gown is not a staple of Peale portraits, the last option is not likely.

With the death her husband on December 14, 1799, Martha plunged herself into mourning. Every personal account of her following George’s death shows a woman with a broken heart, “grieving incessantly” and “wait[ing] anxiously her dissolution.”¹⁸⁰ Her clothing reflected her grief.

Martha was no stranger to mourning attire: she had already lost her first husband and her four children. The clothing she wore during this final period of her life may have largely been saved from those occasions. As she was no longer as in the public eye as when she was the wife of a military hero or a president, she no longer had to balance fashion and industry. She could devote herself fully to her grief, and it appears that that is

¹⁸⁰ Henrietta Liston, August, 1800, in “Mrs. Liston Returns to Virginia,” *Virginia Cavalcade* (Summer 1965): 46.

exactly what she did. On August 2, 1800, Mrs. William Thornton remarked, “Mrs. Washington is much broke since I saw her last.”¹⁸¹

Her clothing during this period was captured in “a striking likeness” in a miniature she had commission from Robert Field “in the usual long laced cap & neckkershief [sic], that they [her grandchildren] may see her as she affected it in her every day face” (fig. 25).¹⁸² She is shown wearing a cap with a black ribbon, a handkerchief—that could be figured—and a black lace shawl or capelet over a black gown. The year of the painting, Samuel Latham Mitchell again described a very similar ensemble, saying, “The old lady was habited in black, and wore a plain cap with a black ribbon.”¹⁸³



Figure 25: Robert Fields, Martha Washington. Watercolor, ivory, copper, glass, pearl, hair. Mount Vernon, 1801. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

¹⁸¹ Mrs. William Thornton, “Diary of Mrs. William Thornton, 1800-1863,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* vol. 10 (1907): 174.

¹⁸² John Pintard, “John Pintard’s Journal,” in R. W. G. Vail, “Two Early Visitors to Mount Vernon,” *The New-York Historical Society Quarterly* (October 1958): 352.

¹⁸³ Samuel Latham Mitchill to his wife, December 7, 1801, in Jean B. Lee, ed., *Experiencing Mount Vernon: Eyewitness Accounts, 1784-1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 93-94.

CONCLUSION

In March of 1802, two years and three months after the death of her husband, Martha finally came down with the fever that would reunite her with her loved ones. “From the beginning she prepared for death,” said Thomas Law, the husband of Martha’s granddaughter, Elizabeth Parke Custis.¹⁸⁴ “She gave advice to her grandchildren sent for the Clergyman & took the sacrament...”¹⁸⁵ Her last recorded act was to change her clothes. “At last [she] directed a white gown to be brought which she had previously laid by for the last dress.”¹⁸⁶ Aside from the color of the gown, Law gives no details about the garment, nor do any other descriptions of it survive.

Were the gown in the high fashion of 1802, it may have had the high empire waist and loose, flowing skirt that dominated neoclassical clothing. However, since Martha is portrayed only in earlier styles, even toward the end of her life, it is more likely that she retained the styles to which she was accustomed.

Late in her life, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz described her wearing a gown “with an even hem, of stiff white cotton, fitting very tightly, or rather attached from all sides with

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Law to John Law, Mount Vernon, May 23, 1802, in Ellen McCallister, “This Melancholy Scene,” *Annual Report 1981* (Mount Vernon: The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1982): 15.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

pins.”¹⁸⁷ Niemcewicz was a Polish poet and politician, so it is doubtful that he was familiar with dress construction: his odd description may have been a comment on how different the gown was from the loose-fitting neoclassical styles that were coming into fashion. Though the dress he described was likely not the same one Martha set out to die in, it could indicate a pattern of Martha continuing to wear the tightly fitted bodices that had been in fashion for the majority of her life.

The color of the dress, white, was especially poignant, and the symbolism was likely thought out by Martha. White represented purity and innocence, and Martha was a clean soul rising to meet her maker and reunite with her family. Though it was the last image of her that her grandchildren would have, it was not the most lasting.

The clothing that they treasured and allowed to be treasured by the nation represented different facets of a full life: she was a wealthy planter’s wife, a self-sufficient widow, wife of a military hero, the living allegorical representation of a nation, and the premier lady of that nation’s newly established “court.” Fragments from each of these life stages were preserved and passed on as souvenirs to visitors and family friends.

While the clothing she wore by no means offers the entire picture of her life, it can and does tell us how she wanted to be seen and understood by those around her. Since Martha was universally praised throughout her life, her image cultivation was a success—most especially the image she tailored during and after the Revolution.

This image of a plain, industrious, modest woman was so strong, it is the only way she was remembered for centuries. Since the bulk of the clothing that survives is

¹⁸⁷ Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, *Under Their Vine and Fig Tree: Travels through America in 1797-1799, 1805 with some further account of life in New Jersey*, Metchie J. E. Budka, trans. (Elizabeth, NJ: The Grassman Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), 85.

from before this period, we can now see a fuller picture of the drastic change of clothes she donned in service to her nation.

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Teresa Teixeira graduated from The College of William and Mary in 2011 with a Bachelor of Arts in History after completing an Associate of the same at Bakersfield College. During her tenure taking classes for the Masters of Art in History of Decorative Arts through George Mason, she completed internships at the National Museum of American History, George Washington's Mount Vernon, and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. After two years as the Andrew W. Mellon fellow in Textiles and Historic Interiors at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, she is now the Curator of Collections at James Madison's Montpelier.