

Carlyle House

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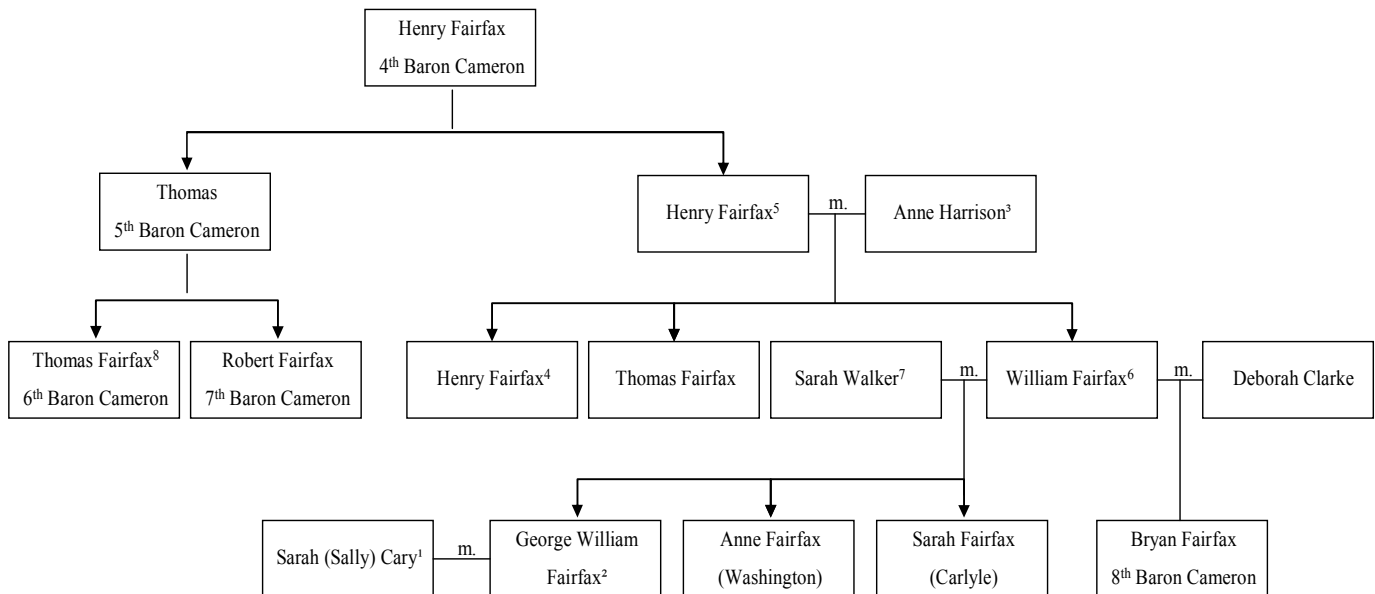
True Parentage: Myths of Racial Purity and the Meaning of Miscegenation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World

By Philippe Halbert

In 1802, Sally Cary Fairfax¹, wife of George William Fairfax², formerly of Belvoir Plantation and living in England, wrote to her American nephew, Henry, relating a family conflict that had occurred nearly fifty years earlier. In 1757, George William Fairfax, had undertaken a voyage to England to assist in the settlement of his deceased grandmother's estate. His grandmother, the late Anne Harrison Fairfax's³ worldly goods and properties were to be conferred upon her eldest son, also named Henry⁴. Sally, who had been living in Bath and Yorkshire since 1773, remarked that Henry⁵, her uncle would have left the estate to his nephew George William, eldest son of his brother William Fairfax⁶ of Belvoir, "but from an impression that my husband's [George

William's] mother [Sarah Walker⁷] was a black woman, if my Fairfax had not come over to see his uncle and convinced him that he was not a negroe's son... Sometimes I've been almost convinced that the strange claim is by agreement to answer some family purpose that I am not informed of; be this as it may, I've the satisfaction to have laid the truth before you [...] as it was not possible to write to you, my brother, or any other of my friends without mention of so extraordinary a subject, I would not write a line to anyone."

Widowed since 1787 and ostracized by most of her peers for her American upbringing, what did Sally have to gain in sharing this story with her nephew? Such a rumor had important



Fairfax family tree, describing the passing of the barony of Cameron, including the placement of George William Fairfax, who died before he could inherit the title. There is some question as to whether or not George William would have been accepted as the new Baron due to the unknown ancestry of his mother, Sarah Walker Fairfax.

CARLYLE HOUSE
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ramifications. George William stood to inherit the noble title then held by his childless second cousin Thomas⁸, sixth Lord Fairfax of Cameron. If the claim detailed in his wife's letter is to be believed, such an accusation would dash any hope of his eventually assuming the Fairfax barony, let alone inheriting the Yorkshire estate held by his grandmother. In light of the Fairfax family's prominence in colonial Virginia and connections to the Washingtons, some genealogists and historians, including former Carlyle House curator and director Jim Bartlinski, have addressed this seemingly incongruous anecdote recorded by Sally Fairfax in the early years of the nineteenth century. Although primary sources and a definite answer have yet to be reached regarding the allegation that George William Fairfax and his siblings Anne (Mrs. Lawrence Washington) and Sarah (Mrs. John Carlyle) were of mixed heritage, the intent of this article is to lay bare the historical context for this "strange claim."

Tantalizing clues about the prevalence and nature of miscegenation in the eighteenth century abound despite the presence of colonial legislation forbidding interracial marriage and the social construct of racial "purity." The apparent apprehension and confusion of the English Fairfaxes over the true parentage of the colonial-born George William and his siblings is rooted in the mystery surrounding their mother, Sarah Walker Fairfax. Sarah was most likely born in Barbados at the turn of the eighteenth century, and she married William Fairfax in the Bahamas in 1723. Her parents were Major Thomas Walker and his wife, also named Sarah, whose surname remains unknown. In addition to Sally Fairfax's 1802 letter, it has been suggested that Mrs. Thomas Walker might have been a free or former slave. Unlike Virginia and other mainland colonies, British possessions in the Caribbean did not have legal restrictions on mixed marriages or their resulting children, and the absence of such laws contributed to the development of a distinctive West Indian social hierarchy. Simply put, race did not imply the same social limitations or legal impediments that it did on the mainland. As penned in his diary, Jamaican planter John Thistlewood noted in 1765 that "the Subject of our discourse at Dinner was about getting of a Wife



Louis-Armand Gaterau of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) and his wife Louise Clavel flanked two slaves, anonymous artist, circa 1780-1785

when it was Determined that it did not signify what Coller a Woman was of provided shee had a Good fortune."

While much has been written about the violence and coercion that often accompanied master-slave relationships, many European colonists in the Caribbean chose mistresses and even spouses drawn from the diverse population of slaves and free people of color. Unburdened by the weight of slavery, the latter were either manumitted slaves or the free children born out of miscegenous relationships between Europeans, Africans, indigenous islanders, and/or their mixed descendants. Running their own plantations or working as artisans, business owners, and even serving local governments, mixed-race free people could become prosperous and attain the "Good fortune" evoked at Thistlewood's dinner table. European artists working in the West Indies depict them dressed in relatively fine clothing, some even donning jewelry, and owning slaves themselves. As described by Thomas Atwood, a colonial magistrate in Dominica and the Bahamas, "the free people of colour are remarkably fond of dress and dancing[...]



their ladies being usually dressed in silks, silk stockings and shoes; buckles, bracelets and rings of gold and silver, to a considerable value.”

In contrast to the West Indian colonies like Barbados and the Bahamas, interracial marriage was outlawed in mainland British North America. Laws were devised and passed there to control the growing mixed-race population. Hugh Davis was the first known offender in Virginia; he was whipped “for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of Christians by defiling his body in lying with a negro” in 1630. Sixty years later, the 1691 Act for suppressing outlying slaves declared that “[...] for prevention of that abominable mixture and spurious issue which hereafter may encrease in this dominion [...]it is hereby enacted, that for the time to come, whatsoever English or other white man or woman being free shall intermarry with a negroe, mulatto, or Indian man or woman bond or free shall within three months after such marriage be banished and removed from this dominion forever.” Earlier legislation from the 1660s established the concept that a mother’s condition determined that of her child. This assured the freedom of children born to a white woman but fathered by a slave and gave slave status to the children of enslaved women. However, the 1691 Act instituted new punishments, including a fine or five years of forced servitude for white mothers and the

virtual enslavement of any resulting mixed children for thirty years.

Given the absence of any law restricting mixed



A mixed-race merchant family in colonial Mexico, Miguel Cabrera, 1763



Detail, *Free Women of Color, their Children, and Slaves in Dominica*, Agostino Brunias, circa 1770-1773

marriages and other relationships in the Caribbean, it is possible that Major Walker’s wife was mixed, if not entirely African, or even the daughter of slaves. Suspicions over their daughter Sarah Walker Fairfax’s racial origins would manifest themselves most palpably in how her children were viewed by their English family. After his wife Sarah’s death in 1731, William Fairfax wrote to his mother mentioning the possibility of sending George William to England, and that a Colonel Gale had “indeed kindly offered to take the care of safe conducting my eldest son George, upwards of seven years old but I judged it too forward to send him before I had your’s or some one of his Uncles’ or Aunts’ invitation, altho’ I have no reason to doubt any of their indulgences to a poor West India boy especially as he has the marks in his visage that will always testify his parentage.”

What exactly William Fairfax meant in his letter is unclear. “West India” was used interchangeably with “creole” in eighteenth-century parlance, and could imply either miscegenation or birth outside the mainland. George William Fairfax and his brother Thomas,



who was killed at sea in 1746, were born in the Bahamas and their sisters Anne and Sarah in Massachusetts; their contemporaries may very well have referred to the brothers as creoles for their colonial birthplaces. As to the “marks” in the young George William’s face, this detail could be in relation to his resemblance to Fairfax cousins in England as much as it could be to any perceived racial features in his physiognomy. The meaning behind this description is puzzling and its interpretation has varied.

Despite the unanswered questions surrounding Sarah Walker Fairfax and her children, documented instances of mixed-race families can be found throughout the colonies and at all social strata. One of the most curious incidents to occur in colonial Virginia took place in the 1740s when Colonel John Custis revealed plans to leave his entire estate to a formerly enslaved ten-year old boy. Referred to as Negro Jack or Black Jack, this child was the son of a Custis slave named Alice. His father was never officially identified, but John Custis all but acknowledged his paternity when he went to the governor’s council to demand his emancipation in 1744, commissioned his portrait, and made provisions for the upkeep of his “dear black boy Jack.” As John Custis prepared Jack’s inheritance, his legitimate and hated son, Daniel Parke Custis, was to be completely disinherited.

Although the senior Custis was persuaded to keep Daniel as an heir, his final will and testament required his son to see to the construction of Jack’s “handsome strong convenient dwelling house” and the transfer of ownership of five slaves, including Alice, to Jack. It also stipulated that Daniel act as Jack’s guardian until he reached the age of seventeen. The relationship between John and Daniel Custis remained uneasy, and it was not until Daniel presented Jack with a horse and bridle that their father approved his engagement to Martha Dandridge, the future Mrs. George Washington. Aware of the obvious love that her future father-in-law had for Jack, the discerning seventeen-year old Martha very likely made this gift without her fiancé’s knowledge. She, too, had enslaved half-siblings- her half-sister Anne was among the slaves brought to work at Mount Vernon after her second marriage in

1759- and was probably aware of the limited influence that she or Daniel could have in settling such matters.

In accordance with John Custis’s will, Jack went to live with Daniel at his plantation, White House, after their father’s death in 1749. Martha joined them there by 1750, making for somewhat awkward living arrangements. Although Jack died suddenly from illness in 1751, thereby freeing his half-brother and sister-in-law from having to carry out his father’s wishes, this dramatic incident is demonstrative of the unashamed and often scandalous nature of issues surrounding mixed-race heirs and their families in colonial Virginia. Although the still unresolved nature of Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with his wife’s dower slave, Sally Hemings, remains the most controversial example, the Custis drama and the cultural and historical context surrounding the “parentage” of William and Sarah Walker Fairfax’s children demonstrate that this was not an isolated experience.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scores of mixed people returned to Europe in search of fortune or family. Some proved



Dido Elizabeth Belle and her cousin Elizabeth Murray, anonymous artist, circa 1775.

successful in their quests. Joseph Boulogne, the mulatto son born to an enslaved woman and a French planter in Guadeloupe, journeyed to Paris and he became a celebrity fencer, composer, and director of the largest orchestra in Europe. The illegitimate daughter of Sir John Lindsay and a woman of African descent, Dido Elizabeth Belle was probably born in Cuba in the early 1760s and brought to live in the home of her uncle, the Earl of



Mansfield, near London. She married and established a family in England. For others, their presence in London helped harden resentment and repugnance over miscegenation and colonial inferiority. This was especially true in cases where the existence of mixed-race heirs complicated the settlement of family estates.

According to his wife, George William Fairfax potentially faced this prejudice in 1757. As for the Fairfax title, it passed to Thomas Fairfax's younger brother Robert in 1781. George William Fairfax died in 1787. His younger half-brother, Bryan, legally assumed the title after Robert's death in 1793. Because George William predeceased Robert Fairfax, it will never be known if the "strange claim" alluded to by Sally Fairfax might have been used to bypass George William in the succession of the noble title. Although definite answers regarding Sarah Walker's racial heritage is lacking, it is possible to situate their stories in the context of the wider social phenomena related to race in places as distant as the Bahamas, Great Britain, and Virginia. The complex nature of eighteenth-century colonial society can be further elucidated as our understanding of history continues to be challenged by new scholarship and careful research.

Sources:

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