The Lost Letter
By Whitney Pipkin

“I wrote to you in July a long letter, which I fear you never received…”
— in a letter from Woodlawn on March 23, 1806

Much of what we know about Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis is gleaned from the nearly 200 letters she wrote to her lifelong friend in Philadelphia, Elizabeth Bordley Gibson. During my time as a Writer-in-Residence at Woodlawn—the historic plantation gifted to Nelly by her adopted parents, George and Martha Washington—I could hardly look away from these letters.

Many of them are transcribed and bound into a book titled, George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly. But I relished the chance to read the transcriptions fresh from the archive files I had access to in an upper room of the house now owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. If I could have made them out in Nelly’s own “miserable scrawl,” I would have. (Penmanship seemed to be the one ladylike characteristic Nelly let slide, writing words “crosshatched” across the lines she’d already written to save paper.)

As I read and reread these letters, I marveled at the dramatic change in Nelly’s disposition over a short period that was marked not only by her transition to wife and matron of her own mansion, but also by intense suffering.

The earlier letters reflect a young girl—as beautiful as she is educated, by all accounts—writing of an idyllic upbringing from Mount Vernon. In 1799, she writes just two letters to her friend: One details her plans—after “cupid took me by surprise”—to marry Lawrence Lewis, George Washington’s nephew, a few days later in February. The other, in November of that year, recounts the who’s-who of a whirlwind wedding trip and Nelly’s recent union to the “one who is in every respect calculated to ensure my happiness.”

But then the letters stop. There would not be another for nearly four years. And those four years would be the hardest yet of young Nelly’s life.

A month after her last letter to her friend in 1799, George Washington would die. Nelly would be bedridden when he breathed his last following the birth of her first child, a daughter who would be the only one of eight children she would not bury. Two years later, Nelly would lose in the span of a month her beloved
Grandmama, Martha Washington, and her cherubic 10-month-old daughter while recovering from measles away from Mount Vernon. At the time, Nelly would be six-months pregnant with her third child, a son named after her husband Lawrence, who would die shortly after birth.

As I read the startling timeline of trials in this season of Nelly’s life, I was overwhelmed by the sorrow she must have felt. I know that many children did not survive to adulthood in Nelly’s days, but that doesn’t diminish the weight of these events—or the way they would have shaped her character. I thought of the year I lost two grandparents and a baby back-to-back, how one traumatic event seemed to bleed into the next, making the grief stretch out like a long shadow.

I think of how hard it would have been to pick up a pen and put these events to paper, even if it meant letting years lapse between the letters to your closest friend.

Here, I attempt to fill in that gap with a letter Nelly might have written in those in-between days. I chose the weeks following the double-loss of her grandmother and baby, just before she would lose another child, as the setting for this letter.

It’s worth noting that, following Martha Washington’s death, Nelly and her family were suddenly no longer able to live at Mount Vernon, which would be inherited by another of George Washington’s nephews. The Lewises had been gifted 2,000 acres at Woodlawn for a home not far from Mount Vernon, but the house was far from completion and Nelly was about to give birth again. For these reasons, the Lewises left Mount Vernon and stayed in temporary lodging at her sister-in-law’s home, Western View, in Culpeper County, Virginia. The author of *Nelly Custis Lewis’s Housekeeping Book* describes what this intense period of transition, intermingled with grief, likely felt like for Nelly:

> “Nelly found it almost impossible to recover from her grandmother’s death. From birth she had always lived with Martha Washington and considered her her dearest friend and wisest counselor. Even though she had married and had children, she continued to live at Mount Vernon as her grandmother’s child. [Now], for the first time she had to face an independent life.”

After this period, Nelly’s next letter to Elizabeth would come in December of 1804, from Woodlawn, the home that is now interpreted in honor of her fascinating life. She would begin that letter by saying that “neither time nor the variety of changes I have experienced has diminish’d the sincere affection I have felt for you.” But the time and changes had, indeed, changed Nelly.
Nelly would continue to write her friend for the rest of her 73 years of life, penning her last letter a month before her death in 1852. I found in the archives a letter Elizabeth wrote, presumably to the Philadelphia Inquirer, shortly after Nelly’s death as her own addendum to the obituary that had run about her friend in the paper. It is a beautiful chronicle of the depth of their friendship and a tribute to Nelly’s character. I gleaned from this writing insight into Nelly’s beliefs, inherited from her grandmother and made her own through the tribulations of life. Elizabeth writes that it was this “doctrine of redemption” that she “clung to... with increasing delight” and that “gave her strength for the occasions that required it.” I try to reflect the seedlings of that faith, amid trials, in this letter as well.

Over her long life, Nelly writes often of the overwhelming love she feels for her children and grandchildren and admits in places, poignantly, how the losses that occurred between letters impacted her. Nelly writes in a letter shortly after her hiatus, by way of explanation, that “sickness and sorrow are not very favorable to epistolary communications.”

In the same letter, she tells Elizabeth: “I wrote to you in July a long letter, which I fear you never received.” Her unique letter-writing style often avoids the encumbrance of punctuation, capitalizes any references to people and deploys the “&” symbol and italics liberally, a style I tried to mimic here.
My Dearest Friend,

How often I have begun this letter never to send it. Even now I am unsure of whether I shall, I need only to scrawl these words somewhere, however miserably, & to feel that they are to someone. It has been nearly three years since I wrote you last, and I fear the woman I’ve become—or at least am presently—would be unrecognizable even to you, my dearest friend. I pray you still think of me as yours, though I have let time pass as it has. I think of you constantly & fondly, often wishing for your company in the darkest of nights, of which I have had many.

Dearest Betsy, I wonder if you have had any marriage proposals or whether cupid will surprise you as he did me once in what seems a long while ago now. Would that the surprises had ended there. For I have found myself surprised by marriage as well, or by the life that has come with it perhaps by coincidence.

When we married on the birthday of our first president, I thought Lawrence did look frightfully like a young version of Washington himself—you surely would have thought so too. Perhaps that was why I loved him so, & still manage to.

They are indeed both serious in nature, but my Spouse is not much like his uncle in any other way. On our wedding trip, his joints were overtaken by gout for several days, causing us to visit the mineral springs for healing rather than continue our arduous trip—a change in plans of which I cannot complain—but the disease, followed by an eye infection and many others, has plagued him on several occasions since.

I hardly knew the General to be sick—& certainly not ill—until the dreadful day he died. Oh Elizabeth how I longed for your company that day. My perfect and presently only child [Frances Parke Lewis] was but three weeks old and full of vitality, though I was not after the weeklong labor that brought her to us. I could not rise from bed, neither to say goodbye to my dear adopted Father nor to comfort she who has been more than a Mother to me. The babe and I but wailed together, separated by frailty from our family in their time of need.

I am afraid this was but the beginning of the hardships that have befallen me since undertaking marriage, though I cannot say that one has caused the other. I had resigned myself, even happily, to be devoted to the domestic life as My Grandmother instructed. Perhaps I would be pursuing them cheerfully if life would allow, but it has besieged me with one tragedy after another. Dear Friend, I am nearly breaking under the load. How can I ever send these words to you? Writing them threatens to pull be back into the darkest of days, still unabated.

I have my dear daughter and yet am bereft of another, a cherub of a Girl not yet a year old, lost to the One who giveth and taketh away. My only solace,
Dear Friend,

is in the words Grandmother taught me to read and to pray from childhood, and in the thought that the Giver might give me another child soon. Even now I am but days away from it being so, miserable with the heat and the roundness of being with child again. I pray it will be a son, but my anxiety overwhelms me. I can think of nothing else but fear of losing another and I know not whether I could withstand it.

Martha Betty was her name, my precious Girl. The measles that took us both away from My Blessed Grandmother took my daughter too and nearly took me. I have been in decline ever since, wanting at times that the disease had taken me also. Mr Lewis says I should not dwell so on what is no more, and I know he has enough to mind with the care of Mount Vernon and his lands out west and the building of our home—if it will ever be completed—at Woodlawn.

I long for it even now, to be in the pieces of it already constructed, were they suitable for living with a child and another on the way. I want not for the bricks of the new place but for the promise of it, & for the views of Mount Vernon that is no longer ours but home still to my fondest memories.

Oh Elizabeth I remember the times we had there almost as fondly as our girlhood days in Philadelphia, when I would play harpsichord for the crowd or—on those rare bless’d occasions—deliver a line that would make the General bellow with laughter.

If you read this letter, especially after so long a lapse in correspondence, do not think me utterly melancholy. At times, it is true, I have been and even now the tears are close at hand but I trust my mood & disposition will change for the better soon. Our time here at Western View has been touched by every conceivable source of sadness but Mr Lewis’s sister Betty ensures I am under the best of care, hot and round as I am. The cottage here is far from many of my friends and relatives, desolate even, but the land does produce the finest & juiciest of plums. I cannot be sure which I enjoy more, eating them myself or watching their nectar run down My Frances’ cheeks.

Would that we were at Woodlawn already, My Friend, and you and Mr Gibson & all of us could take a long dinner together after we harvest all the goodly land that will soon be ours. I long for it as I long for this child in my arms, sweet succor for my sorrows.

My Husband and child unite in most sincere affection for you. Please send word and tell me how you and your dear family are.

Ever more truly yours,
Eleanor Parke Lewis
Sisters in sorrow
A found poem
Composed of lines from Nelly’s letters to Elizabeth

Author’s Note: Nelly mentioned “lines of verse” and poems she and Elizabeth sent back and forth with their letters. Though I have not found any, I see poetry throughout her writing. I have woven one of her own words, on the topic of sorrow, here.

Ah my Beloved friend,
how sadly times are changed to us all,
but to me more than anyone,
deprived of those
Beloved Parents
whom I loved with so much devotion

loss can never be repair’d
I have lost two children
I have two charming children
remarkably lovely
healthy
to whom my life is devoted

I must ever love and regret
I look back with sorrow
& to the future without hope.

I feel like a shipwreck’d mariner
on a rock in the midst of the Ocean
wave after wave
breaks over me,
& I remain

It appears to be a dream
long passed away
so heavily has time passed to me.

but neither time
nor the variety of changes
has diminish’d the sincere
affection
felt for you
my Dearest Elizabeth