

Extracts from *Memoirs of Helen Calvert Maxwell Read*
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Sometime prior to 1833, Helen Calvert Maxwell Read (1750-1833) sat down for several evenings with her youngest son William Maxwell (1784-1857), to recount her life story. Born in Norfolk, Virginia on June 20th, 1750, Helen was the third daughter of merchants Maximillian and Mary Calvert. Living through the American Revolution, she witnessed the Battle of Great Bridge and Kemps Landing, along with the burning of Norfolk and the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. Maxwell's interview unfortunately only partially survives, ending just after Yorktown. The remaining manuscript was destroyed during the American Civil War. Below are clothing and other interesting material culture references from the memoir.

Cross, Jr, Charles B. *Memoirs of Helen Calvert Maxwell Read*. Norfolk, Virginia: Norfolk County Historical Society of Chesapeake, Virginia, 1970.

Mrs. William Maxwell Notes on her mother in law

"In her matronly cap and dress of black satin, she looked every inch a queen..."

"Her portrait is still among my remains, though its life, like eloquence of expression has been marred by a gash from a Federal sabre during the sacking of our residence on the Peninsula. This, however, will but impart additional interest to the picture – and the Virginia Matron of the olden time, may now decent to posterity as the heroine of two wars."

First Evening:

About her grandfather

"My son, we are about to separate, and I never expect to see you again in this world. I am sorry I have nothing to give you but this ball of yarn. Take it. It will serve you to mend your stockings when you get on board the ship. I suppose you mend your stockings?" So my grandfather took the ball and feeling it to be very heavy, when his mother had left him he was very anxious to

find out what might be in it, and long before he got to the ship, unwound the ball, and found, to his great joy and surprise, sixty solid gold guineas.”

Second Evening:

About her father

“He used to dress well, and wore the fine old fashion coat with large cuffs and ruffles at the hand.”

“My father, of course, repaired with all dispatch to the scene, dressed out in his best coat, with his long cane, and a posse of gentlemen and constables in his train and rushing and rushing at once into the midst of the mob.”

“I remember him coming in one evening in fine spirits, laughing and saying to my mother and all of us: Well, now, take notice, one and all of you, that I have joined the Association (against tea) and you must drink no more of it – at least not in my sight, for if you do, I shall be obliged to break all your China for you.’ So we banished the teapot from the table, but as we could not give up our tea, and saw no good to come from spitting ourselves in that way, we used to sip a little now and then by ourselves. And sometimes, too, my mother, waxing bold, would venture to pour it out to us before his eyes – but, N.B. from a coffee-pot, to which of course, he could make no objection.”

“After the war broke out, he used to receive and entertain all the patriots that came this way. I remember particularly that the famous General Charles Lee came to stay at our house, he had on a pair of green Sherry Vallies, as her called them, with leather on the inward seam and a row of buttons on the out...he was indeed a great oddity – or made himself one. Apropos of his Sherry Vallies. I remember, some writer, a old maid, I believe, though I forget her name, wrote a piece in a magazine in Philadelphia, in which describing his person, she made particular mention of his trousers or overalls as she called them. But he came out with an answer, and begged to set her right, assuring her that they were neither trousers nor overalls, but sherry vallies, such as were worn in his Majesty the King of Prussia’s service.

Third Evening:

“After I had learned out here, I was sent to a Mrs. Johnson, a very large fat women, who died one day in her fat – and perhaps of it – for she was a monstrous women indeed. She taught me needle-work and marking on the sampler.”

Of Rev. George Whitfield

“And there he held his white handkerchief in his hand and talked with a loud sweet voice that I shall never cease to be hearing.”

Fourth Evening:

“All who thus declared themselves on the King’s side wore a badge of red cloth on their breasts, and the price of the article rose in the stores. Some wore a flannel patch as large as your hand, but other were content with a smaller piece.”

“We had hardly got there (Charles Sayers Home) when an ugly looking negro man, dressed up in a full suit of British Regimentals, and armed with a gun, came in upon us and asked with a saucy tone, “have you got any dirty shirts here?” (This was the name by which our soldiers were known.) “I want your dirty shirts.” “No!” said I, “we have no dirty shirts here.” “But you have,” said he, “and I will find them.” He went upstairs to look for them, as he said, but no doubt to see what he could steal. Presently he came in again and said “I am going away now, but I shall be back again by and by.” So Saying he went off.”

“I then went to my trunk and took out a purse of gold and filled my pockets with dollars, and we set off.”

“At this, the fellow (a British grenadier who broke into their lodging) made a pass at him (her husband) with his bayonet, which went through his shirt and even grazed his breast, and , turning, then they made for the door and ran downstairs, and Mr. Maxwell after them. At this I rose also, for I thought they had gone into my sisters room, and drawing on my gown, followed chase.”

“The next morning Mr. M left me again, and I saw no more of him for several days. At last, I saw him come in the house, with a bit of red cloth on the breast of his coat. “Oh!” said I, “is it come to this? Believe me I would rather had seen you dead than to have seen you with this red badge.” “Pshaw!” said he “do you think it has changed my mind? Don’t you see how Dunmore is carrying all before him, and, if I can save my property by this step, ought I not in common prudence wear it, for your sake and the children? But I tell you again, you may be perfectly sure that I shall never join the enemy.”

Fifth Evening:

“My younger brother Savage came up from Norfolk and joined me (New Kent County). He was now about fifteen years old, and had a coat – not like Joseph’s of many colors – but furnished with a set of silver buttons for buttons were very scarce and it was hard to get them, and those who could afford it got silver ones, which they could shift from coat to coat, for whose sake he loved his coat as he did his eyes. Indeed, he frankly confessed that he had come so far, not simply to see me and to enjoy my good company, but to save his darling coat with the silver buttons.”

“Towards evening, Savage (her brother), who had gone out to reconnoiter, returned with the Joyful news that the British had all passed over the bridge...” “come now sister” said he, “you have slept none for several nights past, but now the enemy gone you may sleep quietly with no fears about your stays, and I shall have none about my coat.” Accordingly, I retired soon afterwards to rest, taking off my stays, in whose capacious breast I carried the purse of gold for so many anxious nights, and composed myself to rest.”