

“Liberty’s Glorious Cause:”
Three school girls ciphering books from Windsor, North Carolina, 1776-1781

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Fig 1. Overall of Peggy Clayton's "The Rule of Three Reverse Indirection Proportion" page. Joseph Downs Collection, Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library.

A fervor of patriotism spread throughout the thirteen colonies at the outbreak of the American Revolution. Political rhetoric published in pamphlets, newspapers, and broadsides reinforced the ideas of freedom, independence, and liberty. Political leaders in the Continental Congress made decisions for the new country, while American generals fought for the establishment of a new republic. This turmoil profoundly shaped the lives of those living in British North America, including young women. Rarely do scholars have the opportunity to look into the lives of children to see how the actions of the Revolution affected their day-to-day lives. In two rare surviving manuscripts Martha Ryan, Elizabeth Ryan, and Peggey Clayton, recorded momentous events within their elaborately illuminated mathematical ciphering books that date between 1776 and 1781. Studying with a tutor, these girls learned division and multiplication while illustrating ships, homes, people, flags, and mottos of the Revolution on the same pages. This paper will focus on these two books and discuss what events these girls recorded, the iconography they illustrated, and the various mottos and poems copied into the manuscript. From the tender age of eleven, the girl's tutor, family, and community instilled a sense of American freedom and the importance of independence from Great Britain.

Throughout the eighteenth century, tutors taught through a method of modeling and practice or direct instruction. They created a set of problems that students copied into their cipher books (work books) and solved, repeating the process until they learned the skill. Peggey (Margaret) Clayton's cipher book that dates from March 12, 1776 to January 12, 1777 survives in the Joseph Downs Collection at the Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library. The blank stitch book

bound in linen with end papers made from *The North Carolina Gazette*, preserve the over one hundred pages of carefully written mathematical problems. Sisters Martha and Elizabeth Ryan's shared a cipher book that survives in The Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina that dates from early 1776 to March 21, 1781 with over one hundred fifty pages bound in linen. Both books share the large quarto sized laid paper and simple bindings. It remains unclear if the girls purchased these books ready made or created them under the instruction of their tutor, but they are nearly identical.

The three girls lived and received their tutoring in Bertie County, North Carolina. Martha Ryan recorded on the bottom of her numeration exercises not only the Lord's Prayer, but also specifically written out in large script "Bertie County, North Carolina." All three girls recorded a receipt exercise with similar names and listed the location as the town of Windsor, Bertie's county seat. The girls also recorded in their books when practicing with money the specific type of currency, usually denoting "NCC" for North Carolina currency when adding domestically printed paper notes.¹

Of the two surviving cipher books, Martha and Elisabeth Ryan provided the most insight into themselves and their family's lives. Martha recorded in her subtraction problems her age when she subtracted "1776 the present year" from "1765 Martha Ryan Born," making her eleven years old. Thankfully, her younger sister Elizabeth wrote on her page for practicing discounted sales, "Elisabeth Ryan,

¹ "Reduction of Money" in the Martha Ryan Cipher Book, #1940-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Hereafter referred to as Ryan.

the Daughter of James Ryan; and Ann Ryan his wife was born October the 14th, 1767.”² James Ryan and Ann Bryan married in 1764 in Bertie, County, North Carolina. Over roughly a ten-year period Ann gave birth to five children: Thomas, Edward, James, Martha, and Elizabeth. At the time of James’s (Father) death in 1779 he left in his will “all the land and plantations where I now live containing three hundred and fifty acres, more or less to my son Thomas Ryan,”³ making him the eldest son and inheriting the family property through primogeniture.

The estate of James Ryan continued to provide for his children after his death. Ryan’s will stipulated that “all my estates stock and persons be kept together after paying my debt and be occupied to the best advantage and the income to be applied to the maintenance of my wife and the schooling and raising of my children for the sum and time of fifteen years.”⁴ Ryan’s plantation owned several hundred acres of land in Bertie, County where he raised cattle, hogs, sheep, and grew corn and flax. After her father’s death, the profits paid for Elisabeth’s schooling and the creation of the second half of the surviving duel cipher book.

Unlike the Ryan’s cypher book, Peggey Clayton did not provide any genealogical information within her writings. Clayton’s book stops in January 1777

² Ryan, February 2, 1781, “Discount”.

³ "North Carolina, Probate Records, 1735-1970," images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.3.1/TH-1-19440-18258-23?cc=1867501&wc=MDRZ-3MS:169765101,169884601> : accessed 29 Mar 2014), Bertie > Wills, 1761-1784, Vol. C > image 14 of 175.

⁴ Ibid.

ending her official schooling. That year she would enter into polite society and eight months later she married her husband William Jordan, Jr. on August 12, 1777.⁵

During the eighteenth century, middling and upper class families often hired private tutors to teach their children specific subjects. Tutor Bartholomew Le Petit advertised in the *Virginia Gazette* on May 28, 1773 that he taught, “English, Latin, and French tongues, and writing and arithmetic in their different branches.” Petit added at the bottom of his advertisement that, “The ladies will be waited upon at their own houses.”⁶ Tutors often taught both sexes but boys tended to travel to the tutor or school, while the tutors taught girls in the privacy of their own homes. Remarkably, Martha and Peggey’s books overlap in dates and clearly suggests that their tutor taught them within their own homes, as none of the recorded dates match. Mothers taught their daughters the skills of housewifery that included cooking, laundry, and preserving foods, while tutors instructed in languages and arithmetic. While arithmetic may seem trivial to young southern girls, it would later become extremely important in the successful operation of a large plantation.

The tutor of the girls remains questionable. On December 5, 1780, in Elisabeth Ryan’s tare and tret exercises appeared the note “Wrote by Asa Lawrence.”⁷ Lawrence, born in 1755 in Martin County, North Carolina (just south of Bertie), lived the majority of his life as a sailor and ships captain until 1799, when he lost his life at sea. His name appeared once again in Elisabeth’s book under her

⁵ August 12, 1777, County Court Records at Windsor, NC and FHL # 0418142 item 2. Ancestry.com. *North Carolina, Marriage Index, 1741-2004* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2007.

⁶ May 27, 1773, Purdie and Dixon, *Virginia Gazette*.

⁷ Ryan, December 5, 1780, “Tare and Tret”.

profit and loss exercises, probably dating to 1781.⁸ Did Lawrence teach the girls? It still remains unclear. An interesting hash mark or potential initials found on every page of the two cipher books may be the only connection to the girl's seemingly unknown tutor. Perhaps he or she made this mark when the girls completed their work.

Peggey Clayton and Martha Ryan began their ciphering books in early 1776. They witnessed the early beginnings of the Revolution and recorded their own thoughts and feelings about the situation. The first page of Martha's book begins with a full two-page spread and states "Martha Ryan's Book" under which it reads "Liberty or Death." Martha beautifully illuminated the page with scrolls, vines, and flowers and also included a street of five houses and various ships and boats named *The Continental Congress*, *The Freedom*, *The Property*, *The Liberty*, and *The America*. Even at the age of eleven, she understood the ideals of the newly forming country.

While many wrote about the new ideals for the United States, including the three girls, they did not come without loss of life and the reality war. In keeping with current events, Peggey recorded in her cipher book within her cross multiplications exercises "Cambridge the head quarters of the American Army."⁹ After the actions on April 19, 1775 at Lexington and Concord, the British army awoke within the besieged city of Boston. During the second week in May, the Massachusetts Committee of Safety ordered defenses built around Boston, including Charlestown at

⁸ Ibid., Profit and Loss.

⁹ "Multiplication Exercises" in the Peggey Clayton Cipher Book, doc # 1442, Joseph Down's Collection at the Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library. Hereafter referred to as Clayton.

Breed's Hills.¹⁰ The newly organized Continental Army established its camp at Cambridge.

At the same time that New Englanders fought at Lexington and Concord, John Murray, Fourth Earl of Dunmore and Governor of Virginia, unbeknownst to the situation in Boston, ordered Captain Henry Collins, of the Armed Schooner *Magdalen*, to remove fifteen barrels of gunpowder from the magazine at Williamsburg. With outraged citizens, news from Boston, and a quickly growing armed body of militia, Dunmore fled to the HMS *Fowey*, a 24-gun warship lying in the York River, for safety. He spent the rest of the summer sending raiding parties up and down the James and York Rivers and threatening the coastal regions. On November 7, 1775, Dunmore issued a proclamation and stated,

I do require every person capable of bearing arms to resort to His Majesty' s standard, or be looked upon as traitors to His Majesty' s crown and Government, and thereby become liable to the penalty the law inflicts upon such offences — such as forfeiture of life, confiscation of lands, &c., &c.; and I do hereby further declare all indented servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty' s Troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper sense of their duty to His Majesty' s crown and dignity.¹¹

This created an immediate fear within Virginia and the surrounding slave holding colonies. Dunmore's army grew slowly and finally met the rebels at the Battle of Great Bridge on December 9, 1775. The rebels delivered a crushing defeat to Dunmore's army and they retreated to the contested City of Norfolk, Virginia. Not wanting Norfolk to fall into either hands, both the Americans and those loyal to the crown burned the city to the ground.

¹⁰ James L. Nelson, *With Fire and Sword, The Battle of Bunker Hill and the Beginnings of the American Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 200 -232.

¹¹ Dunmore's Proclamation, November 7, 1775, American Archives: Documents of the American Revolution, ser. 4, vol. 3, p.1385. <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/amarch/>.

Living within a slave society with parents who owned slaves in the Chesapeake region of North Carolina, left a lasting impression on Peggy Clayton's life during the Dunmore crisis. She wrote in April 1776 about her experiences with Dunmore around her division exercises and stated, "In utter destation let the wicked tyrant Dunmores name be handed down to the latest posterity by every well wishes to liberty, Norfolk, Virginia burnt by the grand negro chief Dunmore, 1776."¹² As the actions around Norfolk and the lower Chesapeake subsided after the burning of the city, the Continental Army went on the offensive in Canada.

In September 1775, a two-pronged offensive movement started against the British held provinces of Canada. Brigadier General Richard Montgomery led one column up Lake Champlain, successfully capturing the city of Montreal on November 13, while General Benedict Arnold cut through the wilderness of Maine on a direct path to Quebec. On December 1, 1775 Montgomery and Arnold met twenty miles above the city to plan their attack. On December 16, Montgomery held a council of war and decided that his men would assault the lower city while Arnold attacked the Cape Diamond Bastion. On the night of December 30 during a strong snowstorm, Montgomery gave the order to attack Quebec. After reaching the second palisade in the lower city and seeing a blockhouse in front of them, Montgomery encouraged his small detachment onward. Within fifty yards from the fortified position, British forces opened fire with artillery, showering grapeshot into the attacking American forces. Montgomery hit through both thighs and head instantly died and his attack faltered. With no support, Arnold's assault collapsed. In the morning the British flag continued to fly over the capital of New France.

¹² Clayton, April 1776, "Division."

The death of General Richard Montgomery devastated Americans. As early as mid January, express riders reached Philadelphia to inform the Continental Congress the shocking news and the failure of the military campaign. Quickly, newspapers filled with poems, songs, and orations about Montgomery's death. The *Pennsylvania Ledger* published a poem in their Poet's Corner entitled "On the Death of Montgomery." The thirteen-stanza poem captured the love of the general and hatred of those who killed him. The unknown author wrote, "When haughty monarchs quit this chequer'd scene, when cruel tyrants fall a prey to death, their actions may employ the venal pen, Their praise may found upon the venal breath...Tis great Montgomery demands the tear, The brace McPherson fate we'll also mourn, Both to their beeding country's bosom dear, Both from their country, Ah! Forever torn."¹³ The poem instantly became popular.

Editors around the thirteen colonies quickly copied this poem from the *Pennsylvania Ledger* into their own newspapers. On March 16, 1776, John Hunter and William Dixon copied the poem into the *Virginia Gazette* and more than likely editors of the *The North Carolina Gazette* followed suit. Peggy Clayton in the back of her cipher book, copied this exact poem sometime in April 1776, probably after reading it in the newspaper. Clayton also illuminated her cross multiplication page and wrote, "in liberties glorious cause, Montgomery fell at Quebec."¹⁴ Like Clayton, Martha Ryan wrote around her addition of money exercises and stated, "AD 1775, The Brave General Montgomery, defending the right of America, fell at Quebec."¹⁵ News spread rapidly

¹³ February 17, 1776, *The Pennsylvania Ledger*, Philadelphia, Pa.

¹⁴ Clayton, "Cross Multiplication."

¹⁵ Ryan, "Addition of Money."

around the colonies about the crushing defeat in Canada and it left a lasting impression on both Peggey Clatyon and Martha Ryan.

While the continental army faced defeat in Canada, feuding patriot and tory sympathies flared at home in North Carolina. Clayton recorded on April 17, 1776, “Tom McNight thro cowardice keeps close under the protection of the English man of war, o the Tory the Tory.”¹⁶ McNight (often spelled McKnight) a long upstanding citizen of North Carolina, represented neighboring Currituck County, North Carolina at the New Bern Convention in 1775, but refused to sign the document approving of the meeting of the first continental congress in Philadelphia. After attempts and threats on his life from local authorities, McNight fled to Dunmore and remained with his army as an engineer.¹⁷

The same day that Clayton recorded the McNight story, she also wrote, “The Gallant Colonel Casewell defeated the sordid Tories in North Carolina, 1776, General McLeod, a noted tory was killed by Colonel Caswells soldiers (a just reward for such a pirate & Brigadier General McDonald taken prisoner.”¹⁸ The McLeod and McDonald families lived along the Cape Fear River in southern North Carolina. At the outbreak of the American Revolution, the Royal governor gave them permission to raise a company of loyalist to defend North Carolina from those with rebel sympathies. Colonel Casewell set out from New Bern to counter the growing tory army. The force of over one thousand men with two artillery pieces under Casewell, established a defensive work at Moore’s Creek behind a narrow causeway. The thick swamp that surrounded the creek forced a direct assault on the defensive works. When McLeod and McDonald’s men came within

¹⁶ Clayton, April 17, 1776.

¹⁷ Catherine Seyton Alberton, *In Ancient Albemarle* (Raleigh: Commercial Printing Company, 1914), 149-152.

¹⁸ Clayton, April 17, 1776.

thirty yards, the entrenched patriot forces unleashed a crippling shower of lead from their muskets and cannon. Colonel McLeod fell immediately taking over twenty muskets balls into his body. Later that month patriots captured McDonald and held him at New Bern for questioning.¹⁹ As these events unfolded, Clayton recorded them in real time as she learned about them.

While specific events relating to the Revolution marked the cipher books, the girls also recorded many symbols. Margret, Elisabeth, and Peggey most commonly drew flags. On Peggey Clayton's first numeration page she drew a flag with the word "Liberty" across the fly.²⁰ Liberty flags populated the ranks of newly formed regiments destined for the main Continental Army. During the Battle of Long Island in 1776, Adjutant General Major Baurmeister of Hessian forces reported, "...We came into possession of eleven enemy flags with the motto 'Liberty'..."²¹ A rare surviving flag held at the Schenectady Historical Society bears a striking resemblance to the drawing and to other period descriptions. The flag today, a mere fragment, is made of blue silk with white lettering running across the fly edge. Vexillologist and historians can only document these flags during the early years of the Revolution and Peggey Clayton's drawing seems to support this evidence.²²

Martha and Peggey also frequently illustrated the flag known as the "Grand Union." Their version typically shows the British Union set as the canton with stripes in the fly. The girl's drawn examples often included on the fly and canton sayings such as

¹⁹ David Lee Russell, *The American Revolution in the Southern Colonies* (Jefferson, N.C.: MFarland and Company, Inc.), 78-86.

²⁰ Clayton, "Numeration."

²¹ Edward W. Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 13-15.

²² Ibid.

“The 13 United Provinces of America, Death or Liberty” or “We Are One 13 United Colonies.” George Washington made the first reference to a “Union” flag in January 1776 in a letter written to Joseph Reed in Philadelphia. Washington wrote, “the day which gave being to the New Army (but before the Proclamation came to hand) we had hoisted the Union Flag in compliment to the United Colonies.”²³ No examples of this style of flag survive from the Revolution; the Congress in Philadelphia did not make a new flag design until 1777, adopting a thirteen-starred constellation in the canton.²⁴

Peggey Clayton and Martha Ryan witnessed the energetic, patriotic, and *rage militaire* of the early years of the American Revolution. Unlike her earlier counterparts, Elisabeth Ryan who illustrated her book from 1779 – 1781, seemingly viewed the war in a different manner. Elisabeth illustrated her book with horses, houses, owls, birds, men, women, and ships. Some of her ships names included *The Hancock*, *The General Gates*, *The Union*, and *The Wilks*, with the obvious connections to the Revolutionary War. She also drew several grand union flags and labeled them “The American Standard.”²⁵ However, her work shows little of the typical rhetoric found in her sisters or Peggey Clayton’s book. At the time Elisabeth started work on ciphering book, the Revolution entered into its fourth year. In 1776, the British nearly annihilated the entire American army on Long Island and New York. The Continental Army faced another crushing defeat in 1777 at the Battle of the Brandywine, which led to the capture of Philadelphia and the winter at Valley Forge. The Spirit of 76’ hung in the balance.

²³ Richardson, *Standards and Colors of the American Revolution*, 17-20.

²⁴ June 14, 1777, *The Pennsylvania Evening Post*, Philadelphia, Pa.

²⁵ Ryan, “Double Fellowship.”

Hoping for Tory support, the British generals decided to change theaters of operations in 1778 and over the next few years moved south to Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and ultimately Virginia. On December 29, 1778, a large British force of 3,500 men captured the city of Savannah, Georgia. In 1780 a joint naval and land operation moved towards Charleston, South Carolina under the command of Sir Henry Clinton. Clinton completed the siege works on May 11, 1780 and commenced a bombardment of the city. The next day, General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered and the largest southern port fell into the hands of the English. The Continental Army suffered its greatest loss with the capture of over 5,000 soldiers.

Closer to the homes of the Clayton's and Ryan's, Benedict Arnold led troops and raided towns up the James River, ultimately reaching Richmond, the new capital of Virginia. On January 17, 1781, a wing of the newly reformed southern army under the command of General Daniel Morgan, gave a decisive blow to Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton's detachment of infantry and dragoons providing a needed victory for the Continental Army. On March 15, 1781, General Nathaniel Greene and Lord Charles Cornwallis fought the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. Although another loss for the Americans, it delivered a pyrrhic victory to Cornwallis's army, losing nearly a quarter of his men. In need of supplies, Cornwallis withdrew to Wilmington, North Carolina.

While in Wilmington, Cornwallis prepared to invade Virginia. The march through North Carolina proved tiresome and treacherous for the British army. The men needed to cross five major rivers and forage in territory held with strong rebel sympathies. The army continuously raided farms and plantations, destroying crops and pillaging food, but also setting free African slaves from their masters. With continuous

threat of slave violence due to the proximity of the British army, tensions ran high in the coastal tidal plain.²⁶ Seven years of war and the threat of the British army may explain why Elisabeth Ryan no longer illustrated the events of the Revolution within her cipher book. Her feelings about the war may resonate with many Americans at that time as the revolution against Great Britain had seemingly foundered. This would of course change with the captured of Cornwallis and his army at Yorktown in October 1781.

All three girls witnessed the American Revolution and illustrated the events within their personal cipher books. Peggey Clayton and Martha Ryan both recorded the passion and enthusiasm of the early war years from 1776 through 1777. Sister Elisabeth Ryan drew more items of every day life, as the war moved closer to home in the south and entered into its six and seventh years. These two books speak to the girl's parents, the parent's choice in a tutor, the larger community they lived within, and the importance of the events that they lived through. The society in which the Clayton's and Ryan's grew up within instilled the importance of liberty and independence not only for themselves as young girls, but also for their future posterity.

²⁶ Robert Tonsetic, *1781: The Decisive Year of the Revolutionary War* (Havertown, Pa: Casemate Publishers, 2011), 100-110.