

Negotiating the Companionate Ideal: Religion, Emotion, and Power in the  
Courtships of Louisa Maxwell Holmes Cocke

Lindsay Mitchell Keiter

State College, Pennsylvania

Bachelor of Arts in History, The Pennsylvania State University, 2006  
Bachelor of Arts in Women's Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, 2006

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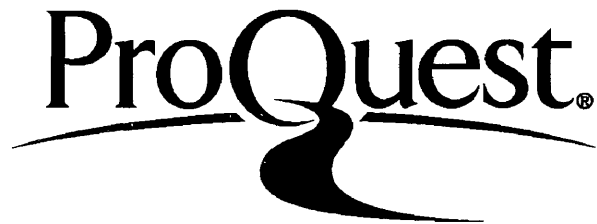
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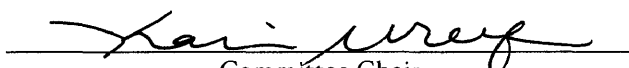
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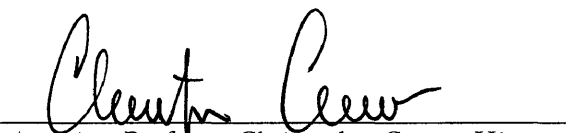
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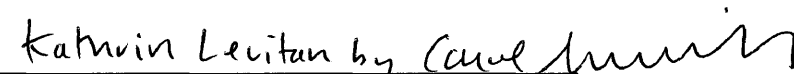
Master of Arts

  
Lindsay Mitchell Keiter

Approved by the Committee June, 2008

  
Committee Chair  
Associate Professor Karin Wulf, History and American Studies,  
The College of William & Mary

  
Associate Professor Christopher Grasso, History  
The College of William & Mary

  
Assistant Professor Kathrin Levitan, History  
The College of William & Mary

## ABSTRACT

While historians have often noted the importance of the emergence of the ideal of “companionate marriage” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, little has been done to trace how this shift was worked out in the lives of individuals and couples. This study considers one couple’s attempt to establish a harmonious union in accordance with new expectations for emotional intimacy and female moral authority. I argue that the current state of scholarship on marriage in the Early Republic fails to consider how the new emphasis on women’s morality and emotional mutuality masks the continued operation of male privilege and ignores the importance of religion particularities, which was fundamental to individual’s conceptualization of a marital ideal. A case study of one women, Louisa Maxwell Holmes Cocke, and her courtship with her second husband John Hartwell Cocke is used to demonstrate the effectiveness of considering emotion, religion, and power in marital ideals and realities in the Early Republic.

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To the memory of my grandmothers,  
Dolores Rimlinger Mitchell and Eleanor Bamberger Keiter,  
whose experiences as wives and widows in the twentieth century  
first suggested to me the progress and perils of companionate marriage,  
and to my mother,  
for her unceasing support in all my endeavors  
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## Introduction: Problematizing “Companionate Marriage”

“But O, my vile ingratitude! Tis even when I have most to be thankful for that Satan is tempting me to guilty repinings, & murmurings,” Louisa Maxwell Holmes lamented in her diary in the spring of 1821. Despite the “sweet refreshment” of the day’s prayer meeting, she still felt the stirrings of dissatisfaction. “When shall I attain the grace to feel habitually that not only that which my foolish heart craves above all other temporal blessings, but all the things of the earth would and could not make me happy[?]” Louisa prayed that God would relieve of her of her desperate desire for marriage – “that which my foolish heart craves above all other temporal blessings.” Louisa berated herself for her weakness in seeking happiness in earthly things, reminding herself “that it is only my God himself that can satisfy the desires of my immortal soul!”<sup>1</sup> Despite her ongoing spiritual torment, Providence, as she saw, would soon send her reprieve. In mid-July she married her second husband, John Hartwell Cocke, each of them holding high hopes for a happy and spiritually nourishing union. Ultimately, they would both be disappointed.

Historians have described the development of “companionate marriages” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the historiography is surprisingly sparse and uneven. What exactly comprises a companionate marriage in theory and in practice is slippery, and often historians have been interested in the political or broad social ramifications of this ideology rather than its individual implementation and the effects on the lived experiences of women and men in the early nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Louisa Maxwell Holmes Cocke Diary, April 25, 1821, in the Cocke Family Papers, 1725-1931, Accession 640, etc., Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA 22903. The diary is also in the above cited deposit but accessed via microfilm: *American Women’s Diaries, Southern Women: Louisa Maxwell Holmes Cocke*, reels 20.1-3, filmed by Readex Film Products Corp., 1988[?]. Louisa will hereafter be referred as LMHC, to reduce confusion as she added surnames.

All correspondence cited is from this collection; spelling and superscripting have been preserved, but the ubiquitous dashes that substituted for various punctuation marks have for the most been replaced by the actual mark I believe was represented, for the sake of clarity and narrative flow. Likewise, I have given the writers the benefit of the doubt in terms of spelling, unless an indisputable misspelling presented itself. Because of the obvious complications of discussing a family while following the convention of referring to subject by their last names, I will refer to the members of the Maxwell and Cocke families by their first names.

Louisa's engagements with courtship and marriage, first in 1808 and then again in 1821, allow us to observe the changing nature of courting and matrimony in the Early Republic. The development of the companionate ideal in marriage was characterized by free choice of partner, emotional mutuality between the partners, and a growing emphasis on women's moral authority. By examining the gaps in the historiography and exploring what Louisa's courtships and marriages can tell us, this paper seeks to closely analyze "companionate marriage" and offer suggestions for future study.

Louisa's experiences suggest several problems within the existing historiography, including assumptions about power and inattention to the role of religion. Historians have frequently assumed that the growing importance of emotion and the ideological power granted wives and mothers indicated a shift towards a more equitable distribution of power within marriages. At the same time, women's religious convictions are often overlooked, erasing important differences of worldview and marital expectation between women and men. By studying Louisa, historians have an opportunity to examine how one couple conformed to and departed from previous analyses. Louisa's second courtship and marriage in particular poignantly highlight the importance of considering the ways in which patriarchy reshapes itself to preserve male privilege as well as the centrality of the church in the era of the Second Great Awakening. We cannot understand her feelings and choices without considering her religiosity or accounting for the imbalance of power in she experienced in her romantic relationships.

Louisa's diary underscores the importance of religion in constructing expectations of affection and companionability during a period of revived religiosity and a growing emphasis on female piety. The first decades of the nineteenth century were punctuated by religious revivals scattered across the nation. Louisa prayed that in her Presbyterian church, too, "[God] will grant us an outpouring of his spirit & revive the disposing hearts of the congregation." Her experience of conversion and conviction of her sinfulness drove her, with many other women, to engage in benevolent activities such as visiting the sick and needy, distributing religious literature, and supporting and

teaching in Sunday schools. Louisa did all of this in the earnest hope that it “would enable me to make the only return [God] can deign to accept” for his blessings, “A life of piety & devotion.”<sup>2</sup>

As a widow and a widower, both Louisa and John had already experienced marriage. They were not starry-eyed youths rushing headlong into courtship, eagerly embracing novel ideas about love and matrimony. The way both partners employed the language of companionate marriage in their love letters suggests that the ideal was extremely important before the 1820s, affecting how they interpreted their first marriages and the hopes they had for their second. Significantly, in both his marriages John selected women from Norfolk’s wealthy professional classes rather than the planter elite, which suggests his choices were not purely financial or coldly pragmatic. He was unconcerned about acquiring additional land or property. Love, or at least affection and attraction, influenced his decisions.

While typicality can best be seen in aggregate studies, Louisa and John were clearly distinct among Southerners. In addition to the wealth they enjoyed, by the time of their marriage both held strong antislavery and temperance sentiments. While they both expected these shared values to cement their union, they were insufficient, and their marriage ultimately deteriorated. Historians can learn as much from disappointment as from success, however. Louisa and John’s often-unhappy circumstances allow historians to probe the divergences in expectation and communication between the two and to speculate more broadly about the ideals and realities of marriage at the time.

Near the end of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth, historians agree, the ideal of “companionate marriage” emerged in both England and America, stressing compatibility, companionship, free choice of partner, and reduced parental

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<sup>2</sup> LMHC Diary, October 26, 1816; Mary P. Ryan, “A Women’s Awakening: Evangelical Religion and the Families of Utica, New York, 1800-1840,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 30, no. 5 (Winter, 1978), 602-623; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

control, rather than the consolidation of wealth or prestige.<sup>3</sup> Various scholars have argued that shifts towards a consumer economy, growing prosperity, Enlightenment thought, the development of sensibility, and the rise of evangelical religion gave greater weight to emotional experience and expression more generally. Prescriptive literature increasingly insisted that parents should relinquish authority over courtship and choice of spouse as the child's feelings became paramount. In the new United States, Revolutionary ideology permeated discussions of motherhood and marriage, giving a republican tenor to these changes. The rise of romantic love and the emphasis on feelings are widely acknowledged as the beginnings of the modern-day ideal of "egalitarian" marriage.

Despite the acknowledged significance of this shift in attitudes toward marriage and frequent reference to it, there are few close studies, particularly of the Early Republic and the South. This is troubling, as most historians would acknowledge that such fundamental transitions are rarely smooth or rapid. In glossing over the history of marriage and courtship in the Early Republic, we miss the negotiation and contestation that surely must have existed as people grappled with new and old ideas about the critical decision of selecting a spouse. By writing off the South as anomalous, we risk ignoring the continuing centrality of race to the construction of gender and the organization of social power in all of the United States. The South's "peculiar institution" helped fuel industry in the North, and racism had nearly universal cultural currency. In slave states, marriage legally was a white-only institution. Ignoring the privilege embedded in the companionate ideal masks the uneven distribution of power across class and color lines.

The current historiography reflects little scholarly consensus about what marriage was like or what wifhood meant to women in the Early Republic, but several trends are clear. These trends reveal generational interests within the historiographies of

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<sup>3</sup> The term "companionate marriage" was linked to the late eighteenth-century English propertied classes by Lawrence Stone in *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

women and gender more broadly. Early historians of women and gender argue that rise of the companionate ideal in America was accelerated by the Revolution's egalitarian ideology, particularly republican ideas about consent and reciprocity between subjects and governments.<sup>4</sup> Initially, feminist scholars' analyses of the ideological work of wifehood and motherhood sought to connect rhetoric concerning women with the creation of a nationalistic ideology that tied them to home and hearth. Linda Kerber and Jan Lewis, among others, found that the expansion of women's moral authority reified their roles as mothers and homemakers and justified their continued exclusion from politics and enfranchisement.<sup>5</sup>

Despite frequent references to companionate marriage, few studies have considered the South.<sup>6</sup> This may reflect the scholarly emphasis on Southern patriarchy and hierarchy. Some early studies of antebellum Southern women reject the possibility of genuinely companionate marriages, emphasizing alienation between the sexes. Catherine Clinton, for example, insists that domineering patriarchs closely regulated elite marriages, so insensitive to women's emotional needs and physical limitations that women were often killed with unrelenting childbearing. Others are more accepting of the companionate ideal but note how the elite Southern lifestyle strained such marriages. More recently, some authors have begun defending Southern marriages, insisting that they were loving, reciprocal, and healthy, with parents employing "authority by indirection" rather than patriarchal tyranny.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1763-1808*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> See Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., Vol. 44, no. 4 (Oct. 1987), 689-721; Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (Jun., 1978), 100-126; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 84; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 100.

Some of the newest literature touching on marriage builds on these previous arguments, and offers more analytical rigor and nuance while emphasizing the significance of power in mediating ideals and experiences of marriage. Nicole Eustace reminds us that the companionate ideal obscured the workings of power within courtship and marriage, rather than erasing them.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Ruth Bloch's exploration of legitimate, marital sexuality finds contradictions in the implications of romantic love. "Women's taming of male aggression depended on the infusion of female qualities into men," she concludes, "a process involving the dissolution of a separate female identity in ways that provided a new psychological foundation for older legal rules of coverture." Women's new powers as "tender agents of spiritual uplift and moral reform" reaffirmed their relational, subordinate position to men.<sup>9</sup>

Martha Tomhave Blauvelt's thoughtful analysis of women's emotional labor in the Early Republic is especially illuminating.<sup>10</sup> She details how middle- and upper-class Northern white women used reading and journaling to document and scrutinize their emotions. She fruitfully adopts sociological concepts of "emotion work," which recognizes feeling as socially constructed and individually negotiated within a culture's "feeling rules," the guidelines that determine who can express what emotions, how, and when. These guidelines also frame gendered conventions of feeling and expression.<sup>11</sup>

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*Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 46-47; Lorena S. Walsh, "The Experiences and Status of Women in Chesapeake Society, 1750-1775," in *The Web of Southern Social Relations*, eds. Walter J. Fraser, Jr., R. Frank Saunders, Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 9; Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 130-131. Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); Melinda S. Bazu, "'Pledges of Our Love': Friendship, Love, and Marriage among the Virginia Gentry, 1800-1825," in Edward L. Ayers and John C. Willis, *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (Charlottesville, Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 1991), 9-36.

<sup>8</sup> Nicole Eustace, "The Cornerstone of a Copious Work: Love and Power in Eighteenth-Century Courtship," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 34, no. 3 (Spring, 2001), 517-546.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth H. Bloch, "Changing Conceptions of Sexuality and Romance in Eighteenth-Century America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 60, no. 1 (Jan., 2003), 43, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Martha Tomhave Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart: Young Women and Emotion, 1780-1830* (Charlottesville, Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart*, 5-7

Particularly useful are her considerations of courtship, anger, and marriage and motherhood. Courting girls had to discern the true intentions of potentially duplicitous suitors adopting the language of sensibility; wives and mothers had to “reconstruct their hearts”; all women had to choose when and how to express the unfeminine feeling of anger.<sup>12</sup> Blauvelt’s attention to one woman’s experience with Calvinism is especially useful. Calvinistic piety, she argues, created a new kind of emotion work, in which women sought to be “insensible to the world and sensible only to God.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Anya Jabour does a superb job of analyzing the subtle negotiations and disappointments that characterized the companionate marriage of Elizabeth and William Wirt, an upwardly mobile political family in the upper South. The Wirts demonstrate how men and women, while employing the same language of romantic love and companionship, actually had very different expectations for marriage. Jabour’s analysis of the Wirts’ attempts to reconcile their often opposing viewpoints highlights the fundamental inequality between the sexes. “Despite these glowing tributes to the ultimate power of love, men retained power of another sort in the public realm of work and politics,” she concludes. “For men, love could be the ultimate source of satisfaction, but for women, it was often the only path to emotional fulfillment.” In the Early Republic, women’s “legal and economic powerlessness was compounded by the fact that men usually outpaced their wives in age, education, knowledge of the world, and physical strength as well,” contributing to women’s “lack of real power in the process.”<sup>14</sup>

When studying the diary of Louisa Maxwell Holmes and her letters to and from her future husband, John Hartwell Cocke, it is striking how her experience departs from most existing interpretations. Several underlying assumptions about power and gender are especially problematic. While the scholarship of Eustace and Bloch has begun to

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<sup>12</sup> Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart*, chs. 3-5

<sup>13</sup> Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart*, 168

<sup>14</sup> Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University press, 1998), 22, 20, 22.

address some of these concerns, they have yet to be systematically analyzed and incorporated into the wider discussion of marriage in the young nation. An immediate problem that some historians have acknowledged, including Suzanne Leacock and Anya Jabour, is the disparity between rhetorical or ideological power and the distribution of material power within individual marriages. While women's enhanced moral authority did have significant social and political ramifications, it did little to grant them more material power vis-à-vis men. It did, however, increase the responsibilities women shouldered. Prescriptive literature and political philosophy now charged mothers with supervising the spiritual development of their children and wives with monitoring the moral state of their husbands; yet they could only influence, never command. Responsibility without authority was a tenuous triumph at best.

Historians should ask, what did men stand to gain as they ostensibly condoned the diminution of their moral authority? Men, as authors, preachers, and politicians, were the public promulgators of the new view of women as naturally purer and more spiritual than men. History has often demonstrated that those in power will fiercely defend their authority, so it seems logical to ask what men, clearly dominant legally and ideologically, stood to gain by ceding some of their moral authority. Threatened by the egalitarian implications of Enlightenment thought and Revolutionary ideology, patriarchal power reconstituted itself to preserve men's political and material dominance. The experiences of the Wurts and the Cockes suggest that in emphasizing women's moral value, men collectively were able to abdicate domestic responsibility in favor of pursuing the productive labor of the workplace and politics, and (intentionally or not) more firmly erecting barriers between the public and private spheres.<sup>15</sup> Despite the avowed value and dignity in women's unremunerated work, the reproductive labor of the wife within the household was increasingly taken for granted and eventually

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<sup>15</sup> I am using "reproductive" and "productive" labor in the feminist sense, whereby reproductive labor is the unpaid labor necessary to keep a household functioning and to raise and nurture children and offer emotional support to a spouse, and productive labor is paid labor outside of the home. Historically and currently, women do the majority of the reproductive labor, but before the stark separation of home and work, this division was less clear.

marginalized as “women’s work” – expected, undervalued, and invisible. Women’s “natural” morality also gave additional justification to the sexual double standard and shored up class divisions. Men, as the more passionate sex, retained exclusive sexual access to their chaste wives while being able to pursue pre- and extra-marital sexual relations, usually with women of an inferior social position. Non-white women and poor white women were shut out from this middle- and upper-class ideal, denied the protections of “passionlessness” and constructed as sexually available to all men. As Lebsack tidily summarizes it, “standards were running far ahead of performance,” yet at the same time the new companionate ideal “drew strength from the fact that it worked for some people.”<sup>16</sup>

This is not to suggest that love, affection, respect, and contentment were structurally impossible in the Early Republic or the antebellum South. Some couples certainly were able to successfully build a relationship of emotional reciprocity and respect, but the fundamental asymmetry of men’s and women’s lives due to the social and legal forces of patriarchy conspired to undermine many couples’ happiness. Different, if overlapping, experiences gave rise to divergent expectations. Interestingly, men seem to have sometimes misunderstood – deliberately or innocently – the expectations women voiced, creating tension and discontent after they set up house together. Women, too, seem to have misinterpreted or explained away men’s expectations. This risk was most likely exacerbated by this prominent shift in the basis for marriage. People marrying in the early nineteenth century had to grapple with significant change *and* continuity in ideas and practices of marriage, cobbling together new and old in their quest for marital fulfillment.

To what extent did women accept the ideology promulgated about them, and often by them? Did they have reservations about their increased responsibility for the moral and spiritual welfare of themselves, their children, their husbands, their neighbors,

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<sup>16</sup> Suzanne Lebsack, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), 28.

and for privileged southern women, their slaves? If we see such shifts as, at best, a severely circumscribed enhancement of women's power, it stands to reason that many women of the Early Republic may themselves have doubted their especial morality. Blauvelt, Eustace, and Jabour support this hypothesis, documenting numerous women's feelings of anxiety and ambivalence during courtship and engagement. These women articulated their understanding that the power to influence – to charm, persuade, or cajole their husbands into behaving properly – paled in comparison to the husband's license to ignore and right to command his spouse.

Discussions of moral power, however, were not simply rhetorical. While they may not have materially rearranged power relations, those who accepted them – especially religious women in a period characterized by renewed religious fervor and its aftershocks – probably saw their influence as an awesome and essential responsibility. Women, who were rather suddenly “naturally” more spiritual and thus better suited to the task of regulating the household's morality, must have grappled with the enormity of this responsibility and questioned their individual capability, even if they accepted the broader argument. Perhaps men had fewer problems accepting this shift because it relieved them of some responsibility without seriously undermining their power within the household or without.

Another factor receiving scant attention in the existing literature on companionate marriage is religion. The first question this raises is: how did individual women reconcile their new spiritual-moral authority and feminine submissiveness? Religious belief could have a profound affect on women's attitudes towards marriage and motherhood. Belief in innate depravity influenced how women approached child-rearing, and denominational beliefs about marital authority probably helped mold congregants' expectations. The quirks of individual personality, vagaries of personal experience, and differences in denomination render these questions even more complex. Calvinist women struggled to break their children's wills for the sake of their salvation and to determine if their husbands were among the elect. Presumably women of denominations

that believed in the essential goodness of humanity or the possibility of universal salvation, or women who were not deeply religious, had different attitudes and fewer or simply different difficulties fulfilling the companionate ideal.

The problems with the current articulation of “companionate marriage” in the Early Republic beg the question of whether this is even an appropriate term for the period. Only rarely could marriages fully embody the companionate ideal of respect, affection, and reciprocity. For the purposes of this paper, “asymmetrical affectional marriages” will describe marriages not founded on similarity of roles or equality of power, but in which the companionate ideal elevated affection and compatibility to a place of primary consideration, not only in ideological discourses but also in the intimate exchanges between particular courting couples. “Asymmetrical” also suggests at the unequal negotiation in which men and women engaged as they courted – flattering, cajoling, and admonishing their beloved, whether about the wedding date or whether they would marry at all – where men and women recognized that the wife would be legally and materially dependent of her husband.

A case study allows us to address these problems by closely examining how ideology was applied to actual relationships. The stark differences between Louisa’s two experiences of courtship suggest both the uneven application of the companionate ideal and its growing power in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Louisa’s first courtship took place when she was a teenager and was regulated by her brother, her male guardian. Unfortunately, only the letters from her suitor have been preserved, so we cannot have as complete a picture as with the second. Two decades later, she privately controlled her communication with her suitor, and while her family was considered, her feelings were primary. Louisa Maxwell Holmes and her second husband John Hartwell Cocke are excellent subjects because they fruitfully address the questions of communication, religion, and region in an abundance of extant sources. Not only did each save the other’s courtship letters, but Louisa also chronicled her private thoughts, feelings, and religious devotions in a diary.

Because she is better documented during this period, and because women were more materially affected by these changes in marital ideals, Louisa is the primary focus of the case study. For Louisa, we have her not only her outward articulations of her hopes and fears but also her introspective reflections on her courtship and marriage. In turning to Louisa's diary and the letters she exchanged with John, we can see the divergent expectations, miscommunication, negotiations, and the subtle (and not-so-subtle) pressures that characterized courtships and laid the foundation for asymmetrical affectional marriages.

Louisa's diary offers details about her lifestyle that influenced her feelings and behavior during her courtship: her relationship with her family, social visits, church attendance, prayer group meetings, and benevolent undertakings. Of course, it was primarily white, middle- and upper-class women who had the time, energy, and resources to devote to organized benevolence. Likewise, Louisa's affluence, education, and leisure – shored at least indirectly up by slavery – permitted her the time and means to extensively record her experiences and thoughts. The activities in which she found and articulated a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging were all inextricably tied to her privileged class and racial position. Thus, this study is limited to analyzing the experiences of privileged white women and attempts to recognize the ways in which class status regulated marital ideals and realities.

More than just a record of her activities, Louisa's diary also contains her private hopes, fears, and prayers about marriage, and her assessment of her spiritual state. In many ways, Louisa's diary is primarily a religious document, as her main task was usually comparing herself to a Christian ideal and beseeching God for assistance in her spiritual development. As a Presbyterian and thus a Calvinist, Louisa accepted the innate depravity of humanity and the individual's utter inability to achieve grace without God's assistance, which further complicated her battle between self-assertion and humility. Blauvelt document a similar instance with Sarah Connell Ayer, who failed to bring her

husband into the fold and whose journal expressed “simultaneous self-condemnation and barely suppressed resentment” that reflected the costs of her emotion work.<sup>17</sup>

Louisa and Sarah Connell Ayer had, perhaps, more difficulty with the emotional subjugation and self-abnegation they demanded of themselves as Calvinists than women of different sects and temperaments. She continually subjected herself to ruthless self-criticism and frequently lamented her levity, impulsiveness, and irritability. John’s first wife, Nancy, left no record in her letters of the soul-searching anguish Louisa experienced. Louisa’s struggle to reconcile the demands of her beloved and her family, with her desires and her conscience illuminate the centrality of religion in many women’s lives and the how their broader social world influenced what was increasingly seen as an intimate matter.

Publicly, in their letters, Louisa and John’s writing style and content reveal their pleasure in each other, their hopes for the future, and, if read closely, their miscommunication and attempts to influence the other. In their letters, each reveals their awareness of a transition from courtship as a familial affair to a private one, as they sought to extract promises of privacy for their correspondence. Both John and Louisa articulated a vision of companionate marriage, unaware of or unconcerned by the subtle but crucial differences in their affianced’s expectations. If we pay attention carefully, these sources tell the story of one couple’s attempt to form a lasting union based on the emerging companionate ideal.

As noted, to fully understand Louisa’s courtship and its significance for the study of marriage in the Early Republic, it is critical to understand her class position, religious convictions, and something of her experiences before becoming Mrs. John Hartwell Cocke. Part I discusses her coming of age in Norfolk, Virginia, her first marriage as a teenager, and her widowhood and conversion. Part II focuses closely on her relationship with John Hartwell Cocke. In their brief but well-documented engagement, culminating in their marriage in the summer of 1821, Louisa and John constructed ideal spouses using

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<sup>17</sup> Blauvelt, *The Work of the Heart*, 176.

the emerging language of companionship and compatibility and articulated visions of a harmonious union. Carefully considering the effects of religion and gendered power on their ideals and negotiations suggests the possibilities and limitations of the reality as well as the ideal of marriage in the Early Republic.

## Part I. From the “charming Louisa Maxwell” to the pious Mrs. Holmes

*Courting Louisa Maxwell: Louisa’s early life and first marriage, 1788-1810*

“Alas those *amorous* eyes have burnt a large hole in the poor mans [*sic*] heart,” Eliza King exclaimed in a letter to just-turned-seventeen Louisa Maxwell in 1805. “I am sure you ought to be ashamed of yourself[.] I really blush for you and recommend you to wear spectacles to cover your [large] blue eies [*sic*] for they deal death and destruction to all the young fellows[!]” Continuing, Eliza teasingly declared that she decided that her friend would not marry the besotted “M<sup>r</sup> Oliphant,” but “that pleasant, free, charming Philadelphian,” or Eliza “will not be your bridesmaid & I know you will regret that.” A few lines later, Eliza admitted her envy of Louisa’s current travels: “You think the Grapes are sour which is partly the case for really was I to return to Norfolk my heart intent on a conquest[,] I should be disappointed for in our dear Town unfortunately there is [*sic*] no Beaux for me to make an attack on.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite Eliza’s prediction that Louisa would insist that she “[did] not intend to marry for four or five years to come,” almost exactly two years later Louisa would find herself the “judge of the fate of *one* who *loves* you.”<sup>19</sup> In her fifty-five years, Louisa lived through two marriages, widowhood, and evangelical conversion, documenting much of her life in the diary she kept regularly. Through Louisa’s eyes, we get a perspective on a major turning point of nineteenth-century women’s lives via her two, very different, experiences of courtship and marriage. We can see the struggle to reconcile new ideas and older values as she constructed and reconstructed her sense of self and of her responsibilities and limitations in married life.

Louisa cannot be understood without grasping the significance of her upper-class background and her family’s emphasis on education and community involvement. Her privileged upbringing gave her the education, leisure time, and value system that underpinned her post-conversion attitudes and activities. She mad much in common

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<sup>18</sup> Eliza King to Louisa Maxwell, August 31 1805.

<sup>19</sup> Eliza King to LMHC, August 31 1805; Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, August 21 1807.

with other elite urban Southerners, and grew up in a value system that was widely shared by prosperous slaveholders.

While Louisa's life is poorly documented before 1811, the basic outlines of her family background can be ascertained. Louisa was born on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1788, in Norfolk, a prosperous seaport and Virginia's largest city at the time, the youngest of nine children.<sup>20</sup> Her father, James Maxwell, born in Northumberland, England, left the British navy to marry Helen Calvert, of a prominent Norfolk family, on April 6, 1767; he was thirty-two, and his bride not yet seventeen.<sup>21</sup> With the help of his father-in-law, James became a prosperous ship-chandler. Like her mother, Louisa grew up in a slave-holding household.<sup>22</sup> Louisa, like Helen, was probably raised with the help of an African American nurse, fed by an enslaved cook, and watched skilled and unskilled male slaves enable her father's business. Slavery was a crucial underpinning of her family's genteel lifestyle.

Her family seems to have been especially interested in education. When James Maxwell died in 1795, he not only left property to his youngest daughter but also

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<sup>20</sup> LMH to JHC, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1821: "If you choose, you may drink my health on the 5<sup>th</sup> of next month, as it is my birthday."

<sup>21</sup> "My Mother," *Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, Vol. II, p. 56; Russell S. Barrett, "Marriage Bonds of Norfolk County," rpt. *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, 2nd Ser., Vol. 8, No. 2 (Apr., 1928), 106; Urbach, "God and Man," 2. *Simmon's Norfolk Directory, Containing The Names, Occupations, and Places of Abode of the Inhabitants, Arranged in Alphabetical Order...* (Norfolk: Augustus C. Jordan, 1801 [available through Early American Imprints, Series II: Shaw-Shoemaker, 1801-1819]), 55; "Borough of Norfolk, 1802," compiled by Joseph C. Mosier (Norfolk: Norfolk Historical Society, 2005), available online at [http://norfolkhistorical.org/links/map\\_large.html](http://norfolkhistorical.org/links/map_large.html), 39, 55, 56; *The Norfolk directory, containing the names, occupations, and places of abode and business, of the inhabitants ... Also, a register of the borough corporation, and common-council; court-days, public officers, &c. with an account of the different instituted societies in the borough--including the police, and other public officers of the town of Portsmouth ... and a complete list of the streets, lanes, alleys, and wharves in the borough* (Norfolk: A.C. Jordan and Co., 1806 [available through Early American Imprints, Series II: Shaw-Shoemaker, 1801-1819]), 6, 11. Helen's grandfather Cornelius was an English sea captain, who retired from the sea to become a merchant. He was very successful, and was able to bring up his eleven sons and two daughters comfortably. His will carefully laid the division of his considerable property, ten slaves, and a variety of expensive furniture, including a dozen leather chairs, a leather couch, and a costly symbol of gentility, "one large looking Glass." Helen's father was his second son, the eldest being lost at sea when she was a young child. Ten of the eleven sons took to the sea as "masters of ships," suggesting that Cornelius was able to amply assist them in establishing themselves. "My Mother," *LNCVA*, Vol. I, 61, 110 fn.

<sup>22</sup> James Maxwell willed his "Female slaves... to my Wife for her Life" and asked that "at her death [they] be valued, and then equally divided between my four Daughters." The inventory made after his death counted thirteen slaves, most of whom probably assisted with her fathers business, but at least some of the unnumbered "Female slaves" most likely performed domestic tasks. "My Mother," *LNCVA*, Vol. II, 57-58.

stipulated that \$200 each be reserved for seven-year-old Louisa's and her nine- or ten-year-old sister's educations, while her nearest brother William was left \$500, which eventually financed his education at Yale.<sup>23</sup> Louisa and Sally may have attended the nearby Norfolk Academy or another, more fashionable institution, in keeping with the growing popularity of elite female boarding schools.<sup>24</sup> Louisa's confident penmanship and elegant turns of phrase in her later diary and letters, as well as her elevated reading selections, suggest that she received some sort of training that went beyond the ornamental skills many elite girls were taught.

Despite her educational achievements, as Eliza King makes clear, Louisa enjoyed the pleasures of being a carefree Southern belle. Louisa had the additional good fortune of being attractive. She was petite and slender, with dark hair, and thick lashes fringing her “[large] blue eies [*sic*].” Jon Urbach, in his dissertation on Louisa, suggests that a “week was enough time for Louisa to lose one beau, captivate another, and lay plans for ensnaring a third.”<sup>25</sup> Her primary preoccupations were social – adolescent flirtations, attending dances and parties, visiting with friends, traveling to see relatives or to visit the increasingly popular warm springs.

Religion, her primary concern later in life, did not seem to particularly trouble Louisa in her youth. She attended the Episcopalian Church – the only legal denomination in Virginia before 1789 – probably to please her mother and to create and maintain social networks. While she showed some stirrings of religious doubt as a teenager, they seemed to have dissipated quickly, to the chagrin of her brother William. Four years older, energetic and stern, he had converted to evangelical Presbyterianism and zealously sought to bring his sister into the fold. In 1805, he reminded his sister that he had “long laboured as you know impress you with habitual reverence for the Supreme Being, & cordial obedience to that religion which alone, I know & feel, can conduct to

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<sup>23</sup> “My Mother,” *LNCVA*, Vol. II, 57.

<sup>24</sup> See Anya Jabour, “‘Grown Girls, Highly Cultivated’: Female Education in an Antebellum Southern Family,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 64, no. 1 (Feb., 1998), 23-64.

<sup>25</sup> Urbach, “God and Man”, 5.

life eternal.” Louisa’s soul-searching seems to have been the result of some sort of emotional injury, perhaps an emotional injury. William rebuked her for “desert[ing] my side, & wander[ing] from the path to snatch a pleasure which you must have felt to be wrong, and which you will now confess has left a sting behind it.” Assured of her regret, he informed his sister that he was “therefore delighted to find, my dearest Louisa, that most of your sorrow proceeded from a sense of the Divine displeasure, and was indeed ‘after a godly sort.’ But I hope your bosom is now at peace.” William articulated a vision of a righteous, gracious God whom Louisa would later embrace as her own. “The all-gracious Being ‘who delighteth to forgive,’ is better pleased with the tear of repentance than with the smile of innocence,” he informed her, “and if your sorrow has been genuine, as I trust it has, I doubt not that he will accept your repentance as an atonement for your transgression.”<sup>26</sup> William saw Louisa’s “transgression” and “repentance” as part of a Providential plan that would hopefully awaken her to the truth of Presbyterian christianity. Despite these first stirrings of religious sentiment and William’s “pious proddings,” Louisa would not commit herself to Presbyterianism for several years to come.<sup>27</sup>

Just how involved William was in young Louisa’s life becomes clear upon analyzing her first courtship in 1808, which is suggestive of the transition underway in how marriages were negotiated. Louisa’s suitor, Robert Holmes, a young physician establishing himself in Petersburg, employed the sentimental and romantic language characteristic of companionate marriage, but not directly to his intended. All the extant correspondence is between Robert and *William*.

Helen Maxwell had remarried in 1796, but was widowed again in 1805, leaving William as the male authority in the household. He evidently felt justified in controlling the parameters of Louisa’s serious decision. As Urbach puts it, perhaps too starkly,

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<sup>26</sup> William Maxwell to Louisa Maxwell July 25, 1805.

<sup>27</sup> “Pious proddings” is Urbach’s phrase. “God and Man,” 18.

“Louisa could choose her beaux, but brother chose her husband.”<sup>28</sup> Louisa met her first husband through her family networks, as most women did in the early nineteenth century. Because many middle class and gentry families cultivated both local and far-flung circles of friends as relatives, most individuals were in some manner connected to everyone they met. In this instance, her future husband and step-brother, John Read, Jr., were friends; perhaps they studied medicine together, as both became physicians. In the one extant letter between the two, John updated Robert on “Miss Calvert[’s]” beaux and sent Helen’s (Louisa’s mother’s) regards.<sup>29</sup> While the exact circumstances of the Holmes and Maxwell family connections and Louisa and Robert’s introduction are unclear, there is little mystery in his feelings for the newly-nineteen-year-old. It is quite likely he had been in Norfolk for business, and renewed his acquaintances with the Reads and Maxwells, giving him an opportunity to court Louisa in person. Robert was clearly anxious for a speedy answer to his proposal.

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1807, in the first extant letter, Robert was probing for a reply. After informing William of his militia duties, he asked, “Well William, how is Louisa?” He immediately proceeded into a declaration of his feelings for his friend’s sister: “Oh that the small word (*My*) but which comprises so much could be placed before that sweet name. But why, if it is not agreeable to the lovely object who bears it? Would I render Louisa unhappy? No, -- I could not.” Making his affections explicit, he continued, “But I love her, and you know William, it is a strange Passion.\_\_\_\_ Would to Heaven she loved me as well.” Seeking reassurance that his suit was not in vain, he inquired, “Does she ever mention my name? And with apparent pleasure?” Resigning himself to suspense until a he received reply, he entreated “GOD [to] protect her with the care and attention to her invaluable worth.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Urbach, “God and Man,” 6.

<sup>29</sup> J.[K]. Read Jr. to Dr. Robert Holmes, September 20, 1804. John, Jr., died only a few weeks after his father in 1805, which explains why there is so little extant correspondence.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, August 5, 1807.

On August 14<sup>th</sup> Robert earnestly prescribed a remedy for an unspecified illness Louisa was suffering, but his exasperation was already showing through. Evidently William's relay of Louisa's physical condition and emotional responses were slow in coming. Robert demanded, "What is the matter with you, that you can't [stay] in a writing posture long enough to finish a letter?" His exasperation grew from his adoration, however. In the following week's letter to William, Robert confessed, "I scarcely know why but certain it is I possess a constant inclination to write to you. I rather suppose, not to mention any thing about the pleasure of writing a friend, that lovely object upon whom my mind constantly rests with such emotions of pleasure and pain, and who is so nearly connected to you, is the principal and almost sole excuse."<sup>31</sup>

Subtly woven in with Robert's pleas, however, is a veiled threat, and a vague suspicion: "Relieve me, Louisa, relieve me, — or the conflict between hope and despair, will deprive you of the opportunity. — But Louisa would be unhappy:— Louisa unhappy?— Improbable — Heavens forbid. — But ah!\_ she is engaged in relieving another from similar destiny: — Thus I'm undone[.]" Returning to her brother, Holmes inquired, "William does she ever mention my name? and with apparent pleasure? Are her beautiful features deck'd in the placid smile of approbation?" Resigning himself to William's control over the matter, he added before he closed, "William may show this to Louisa, or not as his superior judgment may [direct.]"<sup>32</sup> William's motivation in drastically intervening in this relationship is unclear; Louisa clearly had contact with young men (as the letter discussing Mr. Oliphant and the charming Philadelphian suggests), yet it seems that when the time came for Louisa to answer a serious suit, her brother felt obliged – and entitled – to step in.

Robert's forwardness and Louisa's silence mirror the conclusions drawn by Nicole Eustace in her analysis of eighteenth-century courtships. By declaring his love semi-publicly, Robert had leverage to demand reciprocity and an answer to his suit from

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, August 14, 1807.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, August 21, 1807.

Louisa. Eustace's argument that men's declarations of affection masked the negotiations of power between couples and families seems applicable.

In this instance, Louisa is not merely reticent but virtually elided, transformed from a subject participating in the negotiation of her future to "was little more than a passive object in a property transfer."<sup>33</sup> There are no extant letters between Louisa and Robert before their marriage (Robert mentions writing to Louisa herself only once), which she presumably would have kept, as she carefully preserved the courtship letters *about* her and her courtship correspondence with John Hartwell. Perhaps Louisa liked Robert but was hesitant to give up her carefree life as a young belle for the cares and duties of a matron. Louisa seems to have been not only unwell but undecided when he left in August. In September Robert was asking William, "Is she still progressing on that happy road [to recovery]? Have you had any conversation with her relative to me yet? And what does she seem to think upon that subject now?"<sup>34</sup> Whatever the cause of the delay, Robert's patience was tried for four months before the wedding was arranged.

Robert's affection for his future bride appears genuine; at the very least, he had mastered the grandiloquent expressions of affection that characterized the nineteenth century. "How anxiously & impatiently I have waited for an invitation. How I long to see her. And if it was reciprocal, how pleasing & happy would be the meeting," he wrote William. Like his predecessors in the trials of love before him, Robert opened up in his letters not only to Louisa but to her family, so his effusive descriptions of his love and his anxiety were semi-public and probably consciously shaped to this broader audience: "Yes, Louisa, whom my imagination so frequently paints in the most lovely, rich, and brilliant colors, thou alone art the Person who can loose the fetters with which my mind is so strongly and curiously bound, disperse those doubts which hover around and

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<sup>33</sup> Urbach, "God and Man," 7, 6-7.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, September 20, 1807.

eternally haunt me, and permit sweet hope to spread his radiant ray thro' the empire of my soul."<sup>35</sup>

Some of Robert's impatience may have sprung from insecurity. While Eustace points out that women's reticence to reciprocate affection in the eighteenth century often caused their suitors public, social discomfort, their fear of wounded feelings also motivated them. The same confessional letter continued: "Yes, Louisa, on thy decision my happiness depends. \_\_\_ Important office. \_\_\_ A judge of the fate of *one* who *loves* you." Louisa had the opportunity to make Robert "the most happy, to be blest, – or, with the most misfortunate of the human race, plunged into the abyss of despair \_\_\_ misery \_\_\_ ruin \_\_\_\_\_. Oh! unpleasant station. \_\_\_"<sup>36</sup> Two months later, Robert's anxiety remained. "William has Louisa received my letter? How did she like it?" he inquired in late October, offering an excuse: "It was written in such haste I'm apprehensive it did not suit her taste."<sup>37</sup> Again, he entreated William to visit and give him some measure of relief: "Write me as soon as possible. & inform me what method, or step to take.... I wish to see you very much."

While women had the power to accept or reject a suit, however, a man had leverage in that he could drop one, potentially injuring not only her feelings but her reputation as well, should she been seen as trifling, coy, or deceptive. In a letter in September, Robert pushed for an answer -- "Pray William, inform me of any circumstance as soon as possible, for you must suppose that a state of suspense is the most unpleasant out of all conditions in which one can be placed" – while closing with a pointed warning: "I do assure you William I am completely weary of single life, & am resolved not to remain so much longer." By October 18, he was pleading the distractions of "professional avocations" as his excuse for not replying sooner to a letter.

However, Robert had been given a reason to hope that his wish would be granted. In the same letter, he asked William to "[r]eturn my thanks to your Mama, for

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, August 21, 1807.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, August 21, 1807.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, October 22, 1807.

the [treat] of addressing a *line* to Louisa, and am sorry that I could not do it before, & more fully." His cordiality only extended so far, however. Rather imperiously, he told William, "I hope to see you here by the 20<sup>th</sup>... our races commence on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Be sure to come." Evidently William declined to make the trip; Robert reciprocated the snub with more excuses of business for his silence.

Robert began to sound increasingly businesslike. In late October he informed William, "I am apprised of the importance of the acquisition, if I should be so fortunate as to obtain it, but my business was laudable & profitable, & occupied the mind so closely, as to render it unfit almost for any other of a different nature. But rest assured that my unabated love for that dear object of my affections, so far from being diminished, has increased with each momentary thought." Holmes's choice of words in this instance – referring to Louisa as an important "acquisition" – is rather striking, and not particularly suggestive of an expectation of marital mutuality. Robert's use of commercial language looks like a momentary slip back into the eighteenth century Eustace describes, more serious than Eliza's joking discussion of "attack[ing]" beaux.<sup>38</sup>

Holmes's threats, silences, and pleas eventually produced the desired effect. In his letter to William on November 28 he accepted "the honor of paying her a visit on the 15<sup>th</sup> of next month," and, "in compliance with your just request, to so arrange my affairs that I may spend as much time with you as possible, to enable me to enjoy more uninterruptedly the profusions of happiness arising from so rich a source." Holmes's address suggests that William had, presumably in consultation with his sister and mother, proposed a date for the wedding. Evidently he made it to Norfolk early, for their marriage was recorded on December 13, with William standing security.<sup>39</sup>

By July 25 Louisa was settled in her new home, "Fleetwood," in Mecklenburg County and corresponding very openly and affectionately with her husband, who was

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Holmes to William Maxwell, October 22, 1807.

<sup>39</sup> George Holbert Tucker, ed., *Abstracts from Norfolk City Marriage Bonds (1797-1850) and Other Genealogical Data* (n.p., William H. Delaney, 1934), 35.

traveling to the springs in western Virginia for his health.<sup>40</sup> Louisa appears to have adjusted well to her role as a wife; Urbach concludes that, “[n]o longer under her brother’s thumb, she was happy in her new home, planting a garden, fixing the summer room, planning for the future,” and “content in her role as a doctor’s wife.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps she was proud of her role as a help-meet and enjoying her household authority; as a doctor, Holmes most likely relied on Louisa to assist him in his affairs during frequent travels and to entertain friends and patients. Holmes, however, was in poor health, and three months after he brought his new wife to Petersburg, he left for a change of climate. While Urbach focuses on Louisa’s development of a “martyr complex,” I was struck by her resilience in the face of this adversity.<sup>42</sup>

Although she “[felt] [her]self as solitary and as sad as a poor dove bereaved of her mate,” she managed the household effectively and filled her domestic role as best she could, proudly reporting to Robert her efforts in redecorating and gardening. After removing wallpaper and whitewashing the bedroom, they had “a most charming summer chamber indeed,” though the “neighbours will not hear of me doing the passage in the same style.” Hearing that some of his new traveling companions were “dissolute,” she cautioned against letting their “shocking example” erode the “propriety of your manners” – “the greatest misfortune I could possibly be afflicted with.” She made exemplary use of her wifely influence, urging him to distance himself from this moral threat “to give me fresh reason for my attachment.”<sup>43</sup> She did her utmost to make sure Holmes would return to an orderly household.

Sadly, as Louisa later remembered, he “died on board the ship in which he was returning to this country some time in April 1810... his last letters breathed nothing but

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, their initial correspondence: Robert Holmes to LMHC, July 30/August 1, 7, 24, and October 27, 1807; LMHC to Robert Holmes, August 7, 14, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Urbach, “God and Man,” 9.

<sup>42</sup> Urbach, “God and Man,” 10.

<sup>43</sup> LMHC to RH, August 24, 1808

anxious desire to be returned to me.”<sup>44</sup> Her hopes for a happy future were dashed. As the couple had no children, Louisa little reason to remain in her married home. She returned to Norfolk, to her mother’s home in her old neighborhood, and soon resumed her old ways.

“[B]efore the end of the following Winter,” she shamefacedly recalled, “I was drawn out into what might well be called the gay world & soon lost all recollection of him to whom I had been indebted for so much happiness.”<sup>45</sup> By the summer of 1812, Louisa was romantically involved with R. W. Wilkinson, a captured and paroled British officer who had sought her attentions prior to her first marriage.<sup>46</sup> Her brother evidently disapproved, leaving Louisa torn between allegiance to her brother and her perhaps habitual deference to his opinion, and her affections for her persistent suitor.

Wilkinson fiercely argued in favor of the companionate ideal, rejecting William’s claims to authority in Louisa’s personal affairs. It was evident to him, he wrote Louisa, “that you do feel the reciprocity of affection towards me which is so patently necessary in the married state, and without which no real happiness can possibly be expected to exist: and under these circumstances I think it but Justice to my feelings that we should come to come determination as to a mutual and unconditional engagement of our affection,” he argued, adding “and that too, without consulting your Brother William.” Wilkinson was obviously discomfited and angered by William’s “*tyrannical* conduct towards” Louisa, and frustrated by her acceptance of it. “Upon what principle therefore is it that you have so exalted an opinion of *this affectionate Brother!* is it because he has sacrificed you once before and I am convinced would willingly do it again from sordid[?] motives?” he scathingly demanded, perhaps referencing her virtually brokered marriage to Holmes. He presented himself as forced by William’s interference and Louisa’s indecision to issue an ultimatum: “My Dear Louisa, the time is now arrived when it is

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<sup>44</sup> LMHC Diary, July 19 1818; Louisa suddenly “experienced a lively recollection” of her deceased husband.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Urbach, “God and Man,” 16.

absolutely necessary for our mutual happiness that I should receive from your own hand a definitive determination and declaration wheather [*sic*] we are to consider ourselves solemnly engaged or not, and if so, an unconditional determination that our Marriage shall take place at the expiration of this War.”<sup>47</sup>

Louisa ultimately rejected Wilkinson’s proposal, and his suspicions were most likely correct that William’s disapproval, probably shared by the rest of her family, was a major obstacle. Part of William’s objection likely stemmed from the political situation at the time. Had England and America not been at war, William may have been persuaded; but this son of a British defector and Virginia senator probably abhorred the idea of his youngest sister marrying prisoner of war. The situation was clearly not helped by Wilkinson’s brash and passionate rejection of William’s involvement in what William saw as his business, if not his duty.

William’s behavior towards Louisa’s later love interests indicates that he was especially discriminating, most likely from a combination of genuine concern for his sister but also from a more selfish protectiveness. As a bachelor, he probably enjoyed having Louisa as a substitute for a wife. They not only had an increasing amount in common, but could accompany each other to events that expected a partner or chaperone. William was also consistently – and persistently – concerned about his sister’s spiritual state. Louisa credited William with a major role in her conversion, the second critical life commitment she made. Louisa’s entry into the Presbyterian Church marked the beginning of her struggle to master her mind and emotions, to seek happiness beyond the temporal plane, and structured how she looked for earthly happiness as well. Understanding how her religious convictions shaped her ideas about marriage is critical for understanding how actual individuals integrated the companionate ideal into their worldviews, and points to the wider importance of considering religion in the study of marriage in the early nineteenth century.

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<sup>47</sup> R.W. Wilkinson to LMHC, August 26, 1812.

*A Benevolent Widow, 1810-1821*

Louisa's expectations for her second marriage were framed in terms of her religious beliefs. Her particular convictions also posed special problems for forming a partnership. Her sense of spiritual insufficiency conflicted with the emerging emphasis on female spiritual authority; thus, she sought a husband who would guide her spiritually at a time when domestic spiritual authority was becoming feminized. She struggled to master her emotions and achieve a proper state of Christian tranquility and cheerfulness, qualities also celebrated by the emerging companionate ideal. Louisa also toiled to accept disappointments as divinely ordained and ultimately good not only during the process of her conversion but throughout her life. Despite the satisfaction she derived from religion and benevolent works, she could not quiet her growing desire to remarry. As a decade of widowhood stretched out behind her, she was wracked by her failure to subjugate her personal desire to Christian duty.

"Through the abounding goodness & mercy of God," Louisa Maxwell Holmes Cocke wrote on her thirty-eighth birthday, "More than 15 years have I professed myself to be the disciple of our blessed Lord & Saviour: & adored be his name, through all that time I can say, though I have in innumerable instances forsaken *him*, grieved his blessed Spirit, & provoked his just displeasure, yet he has not forsaken me, nor given me up as in justice he might have done, to the dominion of my own wayward humours."<sup>48</sup> In a single sentence, she summed up the organizing principles of her faith. Her innate depravity led her astray in "innumerable instances," yet a merciful deity had "not forsaken" her. Even in her darkest moments, divine Providence was guiding her every step, and as such Louisa placed her feelings and experiences in a religiously mediated framework, seeking

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<sup>48</sup> Louisa Maxwell Holmes Cocke Diary, July 5, 1826.

to resign herself to misfortune and actively interpreting good fortune as God's work. Yet her feelings were suspect – “wayward humours” to guard against and scrutinize.

The emotion work that Louisa took on as a Presbyterian woman was arduous and constant. She was depraved, and the secular pleasures she innocently enjoyed before her conversion were temptations with dire consequences. Her thoughts and feelings were as important as her actions. She began keeping her diary soon after her conversion (exactly when is unclear, as the first volume of the diary has been lost) to record and examine her day's activities and feelings, to praise God for the good and to religiously justify the bad. She chastised herself for levity or depression and sought God's forgiveness and help as she worked from her initial conversion to a state of sanctification as a benevolent widow.

While it is difficult to say with certainty because of the paucity of sources before Louisa's diary begins, her conversion seems to have been a process that began in 1811 and culminated several years later. In 1811 she accepted Christ, but continued to dance at parties and courted with Wilkinson, who made no clear assertion of Christian belief. In 1812 she stayed at a party hosted by their acquaintances, the prominent Barrauds, and danced until midnight, while William, her escort and evidently her chaperone, “sat with his watch in his hand for fear they should stay one moment after 12 o'clock.”<sup>49</sup> Williams's evident discomfort and stern regulation indicate his disapproval, but his presence suggests his recognition that socializing was a necessary and pleasurable diversion. In fact, when Louisa was perhaps in renewed mourning for her late husband or pining for Wilkinson, it was her brother who counseled her in 1814 to “be a little more sociable” and reminded her that it was proper “to improve the blessings before us rather than to regret those which are out of our reach.”<sup>50</sup>

As William's advice suggests, religious and cultural norms expected women such as Louisa to conform to a high standard. Louisa's sociability had to be of certain kind.

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<sup>49</sup> Mrs. Barraud to Ann Barraud Cocke, May 18, 1812. The Barrauds were John Hartwell Cocke's first wife's family. Interestingly, the recipient is Mrs. John Hartwell Cocke, and the writer her mother in Norfolk.

<sup>50</sup> WM to LMHC, September 2, 1814.

She had to check the “natural levity of her nature,” guarding against any “sudden burst of spirits which... flows in upon me before I am aware of it.”<sup>51</sup> Worldly associations threatened her salvation, because Louisa came to see “friendship with the world” as “enmity with God.”<sup>52</sup> According to her diary and her brother’s admonishments, she was especially prone to being “giddy and vain,” succumbing to “hateful lusts and passions” in fashionable company.<sup>53</sup> William encouraged Louisa to seek out sober, Christian company, to devote time to prayer meetings and private contemplation, and to continually search her innermost self for signs of depravity or ingratitude towards their Heavenly Father. Louisa came to see her nature as weak and corrupt, and every secular or personal diversion that did not advance the Christian cause was a snare and temptation to be avoided.

In this and other letters, William wrote down his urgings for increased religious dedication and voiced doubts about his sister’s salvation. Was Louisa “sincere and zealous in God’s service?” Could she surrender the “shabby pleasures” of parties and the “circles of fashion?” She was “but a stranger and pilgrim upon the earth,” William reminded her; would she find eternal “rest in that city which God has built for the righteous?” In 1815 he asked if she would “be saved at last through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord?” Even four years after her initial conversion, Louisa’s faith was subject to doubt from her most significant spiritual mentor.<sup>54</sup>

Despite her struggles, in 1814 Louisa committed herself formally to the First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk. She was the thirty-first of forty-three “members of the church in communion and willing to submit to its discipline to give their names to be registered”; William was third.<sup>55</sup> While the Church traces its lineage to the Church on

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<sup>51</sup> LMHC Diary, April 7, 1820 and December 7, 1820.

<sup>52</sup> LMHC Diary, April 1, 1820.

<sup>53</sup> LMHC Diary, March 10, 1821.

<sup>54</sup> William Maxwell to Louisa Maxwell Holmes, September 2, 1814; September 2, 1813; William Maxwell to Helen Maxwell Read, September 22, 1815. William asked his mother to “get little Louisa to read this for you.”

<sup>55</sup> First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk, Section A, Part I: Session Minutes and Register, 1814-1838, April 14, 1814, page 1. Hereafter cited as Session Minutes.

the Elizabeth River that began serving nearby areas in 1682, Presbyterians did not meet openly until 1789, after the repeal of religious intolerance, and a physical church was not erected until 1801. Church historian William C. Wooldridge explains the rapid emergence of the Presbyterians three years after the passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom as both simple and surprising. “Rather than accept the disabilities on dissenters imposed by the British, the local Presbyterians appear to have co-opted old St. Paul's, the established borough church,” he argues. Pointing out that a former Episcopalian minister at one pointed served the new Presbyterian congregation, he concludes that “St. Paul's was in effect the Norfolk Presbyterian Church for much of the 18th century.”<sup>56</sup>

First Presbyterian enjoyed a good fortune in obtaining ministers. The Reverend Benjamin Grigsby was “invited to remain” in 1804 at a salary of one thousand dollars per annum. He presided at Louisa’s first marriage and served for two more years until his death in 1810, purportedly after contracting yellow fever from presiding over a sailor’s funeral.<sup>57</sup> The Church had the privilege of Reverend John H. Rice’s pastoral care from 1811 until 1814 (though he divided his time between Norfolk and Richmond after 1812), when the church was “organized, and registered under [his] direction” and the inventory of members was taken.<sup>58</sup>

Louisa had the privilege of a close pastoral relationship with Rice.<sup>59</sup> Close friends with William, Louisa probably saw her pastor socially outside of church as well as at

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<sup>56</sup> William C. Wooldridge, “The Case of the Missing Presbyterians” (Norfolk, Va.: First Presbyterian Church, 2000),

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~07Eusgenweb/va/history/firstpresby/miscreports.html#wooldridge>.

<sup>57</sup> Board of Trustees Records, March 17, 1804, page 19; Tucker, *Norfolk Highlights*, <http://www.norfolkhistorical.org/highlights/27.html>, ch. 27; his tombstone tells readers “in the faithful discharge of the duties of his calling [he] fell a martyr to the yellow fever.” The historian of the Church has put a number of tombstone transcriptions and photographs online. See “The History Of the First Presbyterian Church in Tombstone Inscriptions,”

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~usgenweb/va/history/firstpresby/pictures/tombstones.html>.

<sup>58</sup> First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk, Section A, Part I: Session Minutes and Register, 1814-1838, April 14, 1814, page 1. Hereafter cited as Session Minutes.

<sup>59</sup> Louisa planned her wedding the John Cocke around Rice’s availability; see ch. 4. Karin E. Gedge argues that the relationships between most pastors and their largely female congregants were strained and distant. See Gedge, *Without Benefit of Clergy: Women and the Pastoral Relationship in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

services and meetings. As the presiding minister during her conversion process, Rice probably played a crucial role in shaping and strengthening Louisa's faith. Rice would remain close to William and important to Louisa as well. Years later Louisa arranged her wedding plans so that he could officiate, and after his death, William penned his respectful memoir. Rice was prominent in the Presbytery of Virginia for many years and was successful enough to have published "A Sermon to Young Women." Rice's permanent departure in 1814 was probably difficult for Louisa, who was a fairly new convert, and for William, who was a close friend of the Reverend as well as a colleague in Church business. The loss was probably assuaged by the regular correspondence between the two men that continued for the rest of Rice's life, in which Louisa was often included.<sup>60</sup> For the next five years after Rice's departure, the church was under the care of the Reverend John D. Paxton.<sup>61</sup> There was a gap of just over year until the Reverend Joshua Russell, who was still serving when Louisa left for Fluvanna, filled the pulpit.<sup>62</sup>

Because it so clearly articulates the values that Louisa and William must have shared, a close analysis of "A Sermon to Young Women" is appropriate. Rice offered a religious explanation of women's value that fit neatly with the developing ideologies of moral motherhood and female piety and purity, essentially describing Victorian womanhood when Victorianism was only nascent. He articulates an ideal of modesty, reservation, benevolent influence, and moral superiority that presciently mirrors the emerging companionate ideal and anticipates the mindset of later decades.

Adopting nineteenth century ideas about the direct relationship between character and appearance, Rice focused on the outward as well as inward aspects of the feminine ideal. True beauty reflected a woman's spiritual dedication. Her very appearance "embodie[d] religion in the whole of her conduct" and glowed with heavenly love as she "pursue[d] her course thro' the vale of tears diffuse[d] around her [Christianity's] benign influence," as opposed to the "pallid hue, the languid eye, the

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<sup>60</sup> See *A Memoir*, *passim*; the last letter the William included is dated nine months before Rice's death.

<sup>61</sup> Session Minutes, May 7, 1814, p. 5-6; Session Minutes, August 25, 1819, p. 38.

<sup>62</sup> Session Minutes, 38-44, *passim*; September 25, 1820, p. 45.

haggard mien of a daughter of dissipation.”<sup>63</sup> His description closely matched developing “scientific” descriptions of new diseases that emerged from “unnatural” living. Reflecting the burgeoning political and reform discourse, he stated matter-of-factly that “[f]emales are expected to exert, and actually do exert a powerful influence of society at large.... The religion of Christ requires them to... soften the fierceness of man; and, at the same time, to excite him to deeds of high enterprize [*sic*] and splendid benevolence.” But this was the limit of womanly authority. Lest any of his listeners or readers misunderstand her position, he reiterated, “But again, *home* is the woman’s proper sphere. There she shines in her true glory.”<sup>64</sup> Rice clearly understood the limited nature of the female power he promoted.

His explanation of how to ensure women were able to have a “salutary” effect on their families and societies drew on the ideas of republican motherhood. “[H]ow can she be a suitable companion and counsellor [*sic*], with an uninformed mind and untutored heart?” The “miserable state of female education” threatened the progress of Christian civilization.<sup>65</sup> Rice’s description of wives as “companion[s] and counsellor[s]” is significant: companionship suggests interaction between equals, with women implicitly on the moral high ground as “counsellors.” Rice rhetorically privileges women’s moral knowledge. He clearly circumscribes women’s power, however, remarking that while women had the duty of “promoting vital piety, and lessening the evils of sin,” it would be “contrary to order” if they became “public instructors, and governors of the church of Jesus Christ.”<sup>66</sup>

Rice also counseled women on emotional control. His admonitions support Blauvelt’s analysis of Calvinist women’s emotion work. “We are never more directly in [*sic*] the road to ruin, than doing just what we please,” he warned, “unless indeed the love

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<sup>63</sup> John Holt Rice, “A Sermon to Young Women,” (Richmond, Va.: W.W. Gray for the Franklin Press, 1819), 18.

<sup>64</sup> Rice, “Sermon,” 6.

<sup>65</sup> Rice, “Sermon,” 6-7.

<sup>66</sup> Rice, “Sermon,” 13. Rice was perhaps subtly targeting groups such as Quakers and abolitionists who challenged the traditional gender hierarchy as public speakers.

of God reigns in our hearts; and it is our highest pleasure to do his will.” This could be accomplished through “habits of self-government” cultivating “a quiet and cheerful spirit” that would enable “submi[ssion] to all the disappointment which may occur in our plans of enjoyment. Though employing a gender neutral “we,” his warning carried more weight for women than men. Women had less control over the external circumstances of their lives, and thus were more likely to have to “submit.”<sup>67</sup> Emotional control also facilitated evangelizing. Rice singled out as “worst of all” those women who failed to temper their religious commitment with meekness. The “well-meaning women, who, on occasion of a little pique, are sure to pour out a volley of pious rebukes and exhortations” retarded the spread of the gospel and thus failed both as women and Christians.<sup>68</sup>

As Rice’s pupil, Louisa was deeply influenced by these views and struggled to keep herself within the bounds of their shared understanding of female power. She would frequently disappoint herself, and God, with her failure to evince a “meek and submissive spirit.”<sup>69</sup> For Louisa, each instance of talking back to her husband, losing her temper, or uncomely levity warranted a re-inspection of her faith and scathing self-rebuke. She recorded in her diary the difficulties of total emotional control in a position of relative powerlessness, as the financial and, to some degree, emotional dependent of her strong-willed and often brusque husband.

An incident of church discipline, which occurred just before Louisa left Norfolk, reveals why her frivolous behavior was such a problem for William and for herself after her commitment to the church. A rumor circulated that “M<sup>rs</sup> Elliot, a member of this church,” had been “frequenting parties of fashionable amusements, and sanctioning them at her own home, contrary to her duty as a Christian.” The matter was so urgent that “Elders Maxwell and Camp are hereby appointed a committee, to wait on said member and ascertain the truth or falsehood of said report,” and if it were true, “in the spirit of the Gospel affectionately to admonish her against an indulgence in such

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<sup>67</sup> Rice, “Sermon,” 12.

<sup>68</sup> Rice, “Sermon,” 13.

<sup>69</sup> LMHC Diary, February 3, 1817.

parties... as tending to mar her own spiritual comfort and growth in Grace, and to injure the cause of religion in the church of which she is a member.” Fortunately for Mrs. Elliot, the charge of “irregular conduct” was found to be baseless.<sup>70</sup>

Male transgressions during the period that appear at least equally serious did not face such severe punishment. The church also disapproved of injudicious consumption of alcohol, but was fairly lenient in the one case that came before them. First chorister Nathaniel Fitz ignored his citations for “habitual intoxication,” despite “exposing himself in a very indecent manner” in the street, for two years.<sup>71</sup> Despite their opposition to violence, especially between church members, an attack and counter-attack by two men did not warrant suspension. On being found guilty of assault, Lewis Pollard and Francis Wright were “to be rebuked by the Moderator before the Session at a special meeting, to be held for the purpose.” There, they had to not only *perform* penitence but “publicly to certify their sorrow.” The elders had to be satisfied that Pollard and Wright *meant* what they said. After being sentenced, they duly “confessed their faults, and promised to walk humbly towards the church, toward each other, and toward all men.” Publicly humbled, and perhaps truly remorseful, they promised to “hereafter endeavour affectionately and prayerfully, to recognize each other as brethren, and to walk together in meekness and love, as become members of the body of Christ.” Then the former foes “shook hands with each other, in token of their mutual forgiveness. Whereupon the Session declared itself satisfied.”<sup>72</sup>

While they were deeply suspicious of and concerned by what secular individuals saw as innocent amusements and what Southerners probably understood as the price of honor, and despite their dismissal of male impropriety, the Elders had no tolerance for female sexual misconduct. In 1818, Mrs. Hunt, a widow, was charged with “unlawful

<sup>70</sup> Session Minutes, June 30, 1821, p. 52, and June 8, 1822, p. 53.

<sup>71</sup> Session Minutes, December 15, 1815, p. 8; September 12, p. 30 October 3, p. 31, November 3, 1818; p. 33, February 5, p. 34, February 13, p. 35, and February 20, 1819.

<sup>72</sup> Session Minutes, January [?], 23, 27, and 28, 1817, pp. 12-20.

cohabitation with a man whose name is not known.”<sup>73</sup> A week later, “they found that she had lately got married to the man with whom she has cohabited as mentioned in the charge... Whereas the charge of unlawful cohabitation with a man is fully proved against said M<sup>rs</sup> Hunt (now M<sup>rs</sup> —) by repeated confession to different members of the Session.” Aggravated that she did “not appear to have any proper sense of her crime,” she was immediately “suspended from communion with the church, until she repents, or until further order.”<sup>74</sup>

It was within these moral guidelines that Louisa chose to live. This religious society also offered her companionship and an appropriate outlet for her abilities and energies, with rounds of benevolent visits and prayers meetings. Like pious Northern women at the time, these women subtly reshaped their “proper sphere” by claiming their moral authority warranted their evangelical ventures outside the home. The Presbyterian elders even appointed a committee of women to “to raise money for the support of poor and pious youth, candidates for the ministry. Ordered, Mrs. Moseley, Mrs. Whitehead, Mrs. Holmes, Mrs. Grigsby, Mrs. Duncan, Mrs. Camp, Mrs. Hatton, and Mrs. Cuthbert be requested to act as a committee to procure subscriptions and make collections for the association above recommended.”<sup>75</sup> As a widow, Louisa even had the free time to superintend the Sabbath School, serve as Secretary in Norfolk’s Female Orphan Society, and participate in activities to support the American Colonization Society.<sup>76</sup>

Her diary helped her account for her time, a fleeting and precious commodity to be used for the glorification of God. In one diary entry, she summarized a strict method of carefully planning her day to achieve the utmost benevolence, addressing Christians generally. After “collect[ing] our thoughts every morning” and making a “cool

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<sup>73</sup> Session Minutes, September 1, 1818, p. 28.

<sup>74</sup> Session Minutes, September 27, 1818, p. 31.

<sup>75</sup> Session Minutes, June 28, 1816.

<sup>76</sup> See Urbach, 31-39; E. B. McCluer, “Sketches of the Churches,” in *The Church on the Elizabeth River*, 51; “Female Orphan Society of Norfolk,” *The American Beacon and Commercial Diary* (Norfolk, Va.), Vol. VI, No. 132 (July 11, 1818), [3]; the Society was authorized in January, 1816, so Louisa’s involvement probably began then and continued until her second marriage in 1821. “Virginia Legislature: House of Delegates: January 5, 1816,” *The American Beacon and Commercial Diary* Vol. I, No. 138 (Jan. 12, 1816), [3].

examination of the business of it,” before stepping out, “each [Christian] should ask himself, whither am I going? In what company shall I be? What temptations shall assault me? What opportunities of doing good shall offer themselves to me?” She recommended a similar analysis at days end, accounting for time spent, in what company, and in what good works.<sup>77</sup>

Her deep piety and spiritual strictness belies her interdenominational tolerance. If her church was not holding services, she would simply attend the Episcopalian church with her mother, or listen to Methodist sermons.<sup>78</sup> Norfolk’s urban environment virtually ensured that she could find spiritual services every Sunday, as well as engage in additional spiritual works. In Fluvanna County, she would occasionally drive her self twelve miles to the Brick Union that, with her enthusiastic support, John built in 1828, which was shared by Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Baptists.<sup>79</sup> She lamented when the Sabbaths she was enforced to endure without a “learned discourse,” although she devotedly studied her Bible. She was even friendly with Norfolk’s Catholic priest, gradually deciding he was indeed a “true servant of God.”<sup>80</sup>

Despite her sincere efforts, Louisa’s spiritual life was often far from the tranquility she craved. Jon Urbach offers an insightful account of the remainder of Louisa’s widowhood and her various romantic interests.<sup>81</sup> He suggests that Louisa wanted to marry a clergyman, because he could supervise her moral development while she could continue and expand her benevolent activities; an additional point to consider is that a respected minister would not be significantly below her in station as various groups of professionals grew in prestige.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, ministers were often exciting; Donald Mathews has commented on the attraction of women to evangelical ministers,

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<sup>77</sup> LMHC Diary, February 1, 1818.

<sup>78</sup> LMHC Diary, *passim*.

<sup>79</sup> V.J. Snead, *Fluvanna County Sketchbook, 1777-1963: Facts and Fancies of Fluvanna County in the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Whittet & Shepperson: Richmond, Va., 1963), 27.

<sup>80</sup> LMHC Diary, February 1, 1818.

<sup>81</sup> Urbach, section entitled “The Courtship of a Matron,” esp. 46-

<sup>82</sup> Urbach, 45-46

noting that the lines between “sacred and profane desire” could become blurred in an environment that emphasized “intimate companionship in Christ” and passionate, if restrained religiosity, led by charismatic men.<sup>83</sup>

During the most of process of her conversion and sanctification – from her termination of her courtship with Wilkinson in 1812 to 1816 – Louisa expressed no concern about remarriage or a marked interest in a particular man, but after 1816 she tumbled from infatuation to rejection repeatedly, appearing increasingly desperate. Why is unclear; perhaps she felt she had mourned long enough, and she was probably one of dwindling number of her friends still unmarried as she approached thirty. She became instantly enamored of men she barely knew, and became more depressed with each disappointment, even losing interest in the church work that had given her life structure and purpose. However, Louisa could not escape the fact that women in the early nineteenth century were defined in relation to men. Admitting that she failed in her quest to live her life for God, she yearned to have an immediate person to fix her identity on who could offer her more fulfillment than her brother, someone to structure her life around. Despite her benevolent activities, or perhaps because of them, she yearned to devote her ministrations to a husband, and possibly a family. Louisa never had children, and despite the pressures of the time, never explicitly articulated a desire to do so, although she embraced (at least mentally) her position as a step-mother. If she was barren, she seems to have accepted it, but she dreaded becoming a spinster.

A brief summary of her misadventures between 1816 and 1821 reveals her downward spiral. Her mother, Helen, still an Episcopalian, introduced Louisa to the Pastor of the Episcopal Church in Norfolk in late 1816.<sup>84</sup> Louisa was enamored, declaring

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<sup>83</sup> Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 105-106

<sup>84</sup> The constraints upon the time which I was able to spend with the documents leads me to defer here to Urbach. He insists that William was the only significant influence in Louisa's family, and implies that their mother submitted to his wishes and dictates; census data for “H. Read,” in 1820 suggests Helen (the women over forty-five indicated in the census) was still living with William (who at thirty-six was the “free white male” between twenty-six and forty-five), thirty-two-year-old Louisa and another (the two white women between twenty-six and forty-five), and four children (two girls and one boy between sixteen and twenty-six, and one girl between ten and sixteen), and five slaves (a man and a woman over forty-five, two women between ten and sixteen, and a boy under ten – possibly

that nothing could “equal the admiration Mr. Lowe excites. Every word he utters seems endowed with a force never known before.”<sup>85</sup> Evidently Robert, whom she had loved, never stirred such passions. However, her brother objected; although Louisa felt Lowe had “more of the real Presbyterian about him than any I have ever seen before,” he was still an Episcopalian, a leader of the church William had left and out of which he led Louisa. In the midst of this turmoil, the persistent Wilkinson reappeared, pressing his case once more. She hesitantly selected Lowe, but “brother put his foot down.”<sup>86</sup> The rebuffed Wilkinson heard of this, he sought her out again. Urbach relates that “Louisa, ‘more deeply impressed than ever with... his inestimable worth,’ was weakening.” Wilkinson, however, concluded that she could not bear the lot of a soldier’s wife, and left her forever the following day. Louisa, staggering under this double blow, sought Lowe’s guidance, but was again rejected when he proposed to another woman within a week of Wilkinson’s departure. They married a month later.<sup>87</sup>

In February of the next year, Louisa met a Mr. Griswold, who was soliciting a donation for his New York church from William. Louisa soon thought “his society possessed more charms than that of almost anyone I was ever acquainted with.” When he moved on, his business finished, Louisa was left with “a painful void...which will require some fortitude to bear.”<sup>88</sup> Seeking solace in religion, she passed the next year “entirely satisfied with the lot Providence seemed to have cast for me,” until a Northern minister came to visit her brother for ten days. A week and a half was enough time for her to begin “forming a wish.” Upon his departure, she was “tempted to cry out, what

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three generations of the same family, or remnants of the families represented by the fifteen slaves they owned in 1810). Who the second woman and the children are is something of a mystery to me because William did not marry until 1832; it is possible that one of Louisa’s married sisters or another female relative was widowed and took up residence with the Maxwells/Reads.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in Urbach, “God and Man,” 47.

<sup>86</sup> Urbach, “God and Man,” 48.

<sup>87</sup> Urbach, “God and Man,” 50-51.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Urbach. 51

have I done that I should be mocked with a view of happiness I am destined never to attain?"<sup>89</sup>

Louisa had another year of quiet before her "foolish heart" attached itself again. Touring the evangelical churches of Philadelphia with her brother, she met a "young man of the most promising talents." After only three days, she lamented that her "guilty passions continually rise to swell and vex and destroy my peace." She felt she was losing control: "Stop! I cannot do the things I would nor keep my conscience clean." Whether this dilemma was in some way sexual or solely emotional and spiritual is unclear, as is the way in which Louisa distinguished between the two. A month after returning to Norfolk, a walk with a visitor caused "my wound but slightly healed" to gape again. When she schemed to sponsor the Philadelphia preacher to come to her church, her brother quashed her plans.<sup>90</sup> At every turn, she was defeated.

As a result of all this emotional tumult and her continual sense of guilt for her desires – and perhaps a sense of failure as a woman, relegated to dependency on her mother and brother – Louisa was spiraling into despair. She had waited patiently and served God diligently, but was slowly losing hope after eleven years of widowhood – much to her horror. In February 1821 she penned a short, sad poem summarizing her plight:

Temptations every where annoy  
And sins & snares my peace destroy,  
Love conflicts interrupt my rest,  
And daily wound my anxious breast.  
My soul, . . . —  
Sees every day new straits attend,  
And wonders where the scene will end.<sup>91</sup>

The "vile ingratitude" of her "foolish heart" would not be satisfied with a life of single benevolence. Louisa was unable to smother her desire for "that temporal blessing"

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<sup>89</sup> Urbach, "God and Man," 52-53.

<sup>90</sup> Urbach, "God and Man," 53-56.

<sup>91</sup> LMHC Diary, February 26, 1821.

she “crave[d] above all others.” Whatever the exact cause of her desperation and her fixation on marriage, she would see the arrival of John Hartwell Cocke as Providential.

**Part II. “His tenderness & kindness impresses my heart most sensibly”:  
Meeting & Marrying General John Hartwell Cocke**

Louisa was immediately impressed with her future second husband. John Hartwell Cocke appeared to possess all the qualities she hoped for in a spouse. He was proper but not stiff; sensible but not cold; charming but not insincere. Most importantly, Louisa concluded John had “correct moral deportment.”<sup>92</sup> He was self-controlled, honorable, and Christian, if not Calvinist or as outwardly pious as Louisa. He had served his country honorably as a General during the War of 1812. John was also a wealthy plantation owner, but shared Louisa’s temperance and anti-slavery.

Like Louisa, John had also lost his spouse. His first wife, Ann Blaws Barraud, or Nancy, was also from Norfolk, the daughter of a prominent physician previously living in Williamsburg. John met Nancy in Williamsburg in 1799 while he attended the College of William & Mary. After a sometimes-rocky three-year courtship, they married in 1802 on Christmas Day, which was also Nancy’s eighteenth birthday; John was twenty-two. Despite her distress at parting from her family and friends in Norfolk, Nancy good-naturedly excused the continuing construction at her new home, and as one biographer of John describes it, “became with astonishing ease the competent, industrious mistress of a rural establishment.”<sup>93</sup>

John’s first marriage influenced his expectations for his marriage with Louisa. By all accounts John and Nancy had a most harmonious marriage. Nancy proved an excellent plantation mistress. Although she was raised in an urban environment, she had experience with slaves. She maintained close friendships through a vigorous correspondence and occasional visits, and she proved a devoted mother to their six children.<sup>94</sup> Ann gave birth every two to three years between 1804 and 1816, all the while maintaining the household during her husband’s frequent travels. Their son John

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<sup>92</sup> LHMC Diary, August 29, 1816; September 24 1816.

<sup>93</sup> Coyner, 14; Ann Blaws Barraud Cocke to Philip and Ann Barraud, May 1, 1803.

<sup>94</sup> On Nancy’s efficiency, see Coyner, “John Hartwell Cocke,” 34-36, 54-55; their correspondence attests to the affection and respect they felt each other – see for instance Ann Blaws Barraud Cocke to JHC, June 24, 1808 and JHC to ABBC, March 18, 1807; slave ownership, Coyner, “John Hartwell Cocke,” 81

Hartwell (III) was born in 1804, Louisiana Barraud in 1806, Philip St. George in 1809, Ann Blaws in 1811, Charles Cary in 1814, and Sally Faulcon in 1816.<sup>95</sup>

Tragically, Ann died three months after Sally was born in September. Just after Christmas in 1816, she succumbed to lingering illness, likely due to a puerperal fever and perhaps a secondary infection. John's account of her slow death is a long, moving accolade to her excellence as a wife, mother, mistress, and friend.<sup>96</sup> Despite her suffering, her slow decline was a boon in that it allowed her friends and children to be at her side when she finally passed away. Nancy detailed "certain presents" to be given as "mementos" to her closest friends. To the two of her friends present, Mrs. Cary and Nancy Moreland, the governess, she took off and presented her rings, "desiring them to wear them for her sake." She then turned to John and "took off her wedding ring, and presenting it to me, said 'you must have this, it have never been off before.'" Perhaps this was the moment when John fully realized that Nancy would never recover.

John hardly left Nancy's bedside during the "agonizing trial," considering staying with her a "sacred duty." He crawled into bed beside her, cradling her, helping her sit up and drink diluted wine when coughing racked her increasingly frail body, hoping with her she "might die without a painful struggle." On Christmas, their fourteenth wedding anniversary and her thirty-second birthday, Nancy "said she could not as well commemorate this day as by bestowing her blessing upon the pledges of our love. The infant [Sally] and our younger children [Charles and Ann, ages two and five] were carried to her and received her last embrace." Nancy was deeply pained to leave her six children motherless, telling her assembled family repeatedly "that she loved us all too much, and was too deeply interested in the welfare of her children to wish to leave us; but as it pleased God to decree otherwise, she felt no dread at obeying the summons," trying to face death with Christian resignation.

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<sup>95</sup> Introduction to the microfilm edition of Louisa's diaries, *American Women's Diaries, Southern Women* (Readex Film Products, 1988).

<sup>96</sup> The following account is derived from the John Hartwell Cocke Journal, November 26 1816 – January 1, 1817, unless otherwise noted.

John Hartwell the elder was anguished as well. His usual seriousness and self-control failed in the face of this personal tragedy. Nancy's best friend Polly Cabell arrived on the December 27<sup>th</sup>, and described the scene to her husband, John's close friend Joseph. Hearing Polly's carriage arrive, John momentarily left his wife's side as he raced to bring up her beloved friend before Nancy succumbed to her illness. John "came out to me," Polly wrote, "and throwing his arms around my neck and sobbing, said that I had arrived just in time to see an angel die." John and Polly each held one of Nancy's hands as the "last ebb of life left her." "Oh, who could paint the wild grief of her husband," she wrote ruefully, as John "gazed upon that lovely but lifeless form."<sup>97</sup> Still holding his dead wife's hand, John buried his face in the blankets and wept bitterly.

Perhaps John idealized Nancy as she lay slowly dying and after she was gone. In any case, he had high expectations for a wife. Nancy was "all that I could have hoped for in a wife, or expected in a woman." She had been correct in her prediction, shortly after they were married, that she would "be happy... as long as I live" with the "kindest of Husbands."<sup>98</sup> Nancy also "awakened her husband to the truth of Christianity," fulfilling her role as a positive spiritual influence.<sup>99</sup> Whether this was before he death or because of it is unclear, but religious topics did occasionally appear in their previous correspondence. In March 1803, he wrote his mentor St. George Tucker, of his explorations of faith. "I have had the consolation to say, that at every step in my progress of investigating revealed religion," he confided, "my doubts and difficulties have diminished and my hopes of perfect conviction have brightened."<sup>100</sup>

By 1821, however, John's faith seems to have cooled. Part of what he sought in a wife was a spiritually beneficent influence, someone to continue the spiritual work Nancy had begun. He also wanted an agreeable, cheerful companion who would be a dedicated mother and competent mistress who could manage his large household and

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<sup>97</sup> Polly Cabell to Joseph Cabell, December 29, 1816; JHC Journal, November 26, 1816 – January 1, 1817.

<sup>98</sup> Ann Blaws Barraud Cocke to Philip and Ann Blaws Barraud, May 1, 1803.

<sup>99</sup> John inscribed this on Nancy's tombstone. Moore, "Gen. John Hartwell Cocke of Bremo, 1780-1866," 146.

<sup>100</sup> JHC to St. George Tucker, March 3, 1817.

supervise his huge enslaved workforce, as Nancy had been. By 1820, however, his Enlightenment-influenced antislavery sentiments had fused with his religious feeling. While at the College, John “imbibed such principles as natural rights, deism, and anti-slavery,” noting that it was “absurd to say that any man can give himself away, or were it possible he could not give away his children, who are born free.”<sup>101</sup> As he matured, he continued to view slavery as abominable and turned to colonization as a solution. His wife would also join him in ministering to the slaves in preparation for their eventual emancipation. John’s first marriage seemed to prove the success of the companionate ideal and established a high standard for his second wife. After making the acquaintance of a charming and pious Norfolk widow, Louisa Maxwell Holmes, he thought he had found the ideal spouse.

Louisa felt likewise. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1821, as she recounted the “great cause to bless the Lord for his goodness to me during the past week,” she noted in her diary that they had hosted several acquaintances that day, including “Gen. \_\_\_\_ with whose sensible conversation we could not be but pleased.” Though Louisa tried to cultivate graciousness in her assessments by seeing the best in people, she was more likely to note an individual’s amiableness or charm; John’s intellect and composure caught her attention.

The prospect of getting better acquainted with John was irresistible. Two days later, she “was enlivened by the visits of several friends and acquaintances, among whom were Gen — & M<sup>r</sup> J Barraud of New York who spent the evening with us. I thought it best not to attend the monthly concert of prayer meeting,” which, based on her frequent religious intonations, was not a decision typically or casually made. Louisa was rapidly becoming enamored. She found her new priorities troubling. On May 10, in the midst of a discussion of her usual rounds of prayer meetings and visits, she abruptly asked of God, “Dear Father what new trial await me now? Mine eyes are to the everlasting hills whence all my strength cometh.”

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<sup>101</sup> Martin Boyd Coyner, Jr., “John Hartwell Cocke of Brems: Agriculture and Slavery in the Antebellum South” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1961), 12.

Resignation to divine providence did not preclude action, however. Evidently, John and Louisa had been able to get acquainted well enough that Louisa decided to move the relationship to the next level. Some time in the next few days, Louisa sent a note to her friend Mary Barraud, probably the wife of one of Nancy's (John's first wife's) brothers.<sup>102</sup> Through Mary, unbeknownst to William, Louisa invited John to visit her privately, promising "no intrusions from rivals or others." She was quite boldly circumventing her suspicious family, and perhaps relying on unimpeachable piety to protect her reputation from harm for entertaining a man alone. Assuring John she would "endeavour to be as agreeable as possible," she clearly shifted the relationship from one of friendship to one of courtship.

John wasted little time. On May 15, apparently without forewarning by letter, she received "[a]n early and unexpected visit from \_\_\_\_\_, & more unexpected declarations of his sentiments with regards to me." Louisa was delighted but surprised and apprehensive. She clearly did not anticipate John's sudden proposal after a mere eleven days of courtship, for the "confusion & agitation which it has occasioned is more easily felt than described."<sup>103</sup> She was torn between her attraction to this compelling new acquaintance and her personal craving for emotional fulfillment in marriage, and her religious commitments and familial duties. While she knew in her heart she wanted to marry John, she needed carefully consider it. Accepting his proposal meant leaving both her family and her church.

Louisa mulled over her options the rest of the morning, masking her internal agitation while "making visits with dear, dear brother." It was not until "the evening, while the family [mother and siblings] were at [the Episcopalian] church" that she tentatively "took an opportunity to communicate the important circumstance of the morning, and to request [William's] counsel." Their mutual emotional reactions reflects the intensity of the bond between the siblings: "We were both deeply affected at the

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<sup>102</sup> LMHC to Mary Barraud. This letter is accessioned as May 21, 1821, but, like Urbach, I believe was actually sent May 14.

<sup>103</sup> LMHC Diary, May 15, 1821.

bare idea of being separated & fell on each others necks & wept bitterly.” Louisa “begg’d him to pray for me, that I might be guided aright, & in all things directed by the will of my sovereign Lord.”

Louisa also feared losing the guidance of her church and the satisfaction of benevolent work in the far-off isolation at Brems. Just over a year before she met John, she had rededicated herself to her church. Despite her continued hopes for a second marriage, she declared “I feel now as if I should be the most pitiable creature in the world if anything should ever seduce me to leave my dear, dear Presbyterian church. I am united to it by the strongest ties, and I trust nothing but death will dissolve them.”<sup>104</sup> Now fourteen months later, she faced the dilemma of satisfying her heart’s desire by marrying and leave, or sacrificing the temporal happiness she craved in favor of the spiritual and social support and stimulation on which she depended. While she considered country living “more conducive to a virtuous life,” she had invested much of her energy and identity in the city’s “opportunities of being more actively good and more extensively useful.”<sup>105</sup>

Despite her yearning for matrimony, John’s proposal forced Louisa to actually consider the consequences of becoming a wife, and she found herself wanting. She knew from previous experience that maintaining a small urban household was challenging, but her prospective new plantation household contained half-a-dozen children and scores of slaves. “Never did I feel such a sense of my weakness, & utter inability to direct my own steps,” she lamented. “The difficulties & high responsibilities of the station which I am invited to fill, overwhelms me with consciousness of my insufficiency.” She knew little of mothering, and while her benevolent work may have given her organizational experience, it had not prepared her to supervise the spiritual development of and physical provision for John’s huge enslaved workforce. She vowed to “look to the Lord...who I know can prepare in me, poor insignificant & vile as I am, to be an instrument in his hand of some little good.”

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<sup>104</sup> LHMC Diary, March 16, 1820

<sup>105</sup> LMHC Diary, August 18, 1818

Louisa's family exacerbated her doubts. The 16<sup>th</sup> was "a very sad day to" Louisa. Her mother, "whom I have also acquainted with my secret," and William "were so much distressed," with William "scarcely eating anything," that Louisa "secretly determined, it was an intimation of providence how I was to act & that it could not be his will that I make those unhappy to whom I owed every thing." She interpreted her family's unhappiness was a sign from God that she should end her engagement. While familial power was no longer absolute in directing women's marriages, it was certainly powerful; women could be influenced in the same manner they influenced others, through emotion. Louisa was perhaps especially susceptible to this indirect pressure because she sought to interpret everything with a providential framework, constantly looking for outward affirmations of her decisions and feelings.

Louisa's resolve was short-lived. "In the evening however, we had the pleasure of my dear M<sup>r</sup> Flithians's company, M<sup>r</sup> M. Robinson, & \_\_," she recorded in her diary. "This last [John] was so amiable, so every thing my heart could desire, to considerably shake the resolution I had formed previously." In the end, Louisa's desire for personal fulfillment overrode her family's disapproval. The fact that Louisa, so clearly committed to vision of Christian feminine submissiveness and familial duty, would privilege her emotional fulfillment over her family's strong wishes suggests that the companionate ideal was of increasing importance during her lifetime. The fact that her first marriage appears to have been largely brokered by her brother despite requiring her to sacrifice the pleasures of youthful sociability implies that her attitudes had indeed changed during her years of widowhood.

The next few days were joyfully busy as Louisa worked to integrate John more completely into her life and feelings. By May 20, she was taking communion with her sisters, some friends, and "shall I not say it? him, who I look forward to be the partner of my future days, all partakers at the feast of Jesus' love!" Louisa was thrilled by the prospect of many future communions with her husband and new family, strengthening and enriching the faith of all. The next "happy day" was "spent in the society of that dear

new friend whom Providence in the riches of his bounty has recently given me, & for whom I shall have cause to bless his name, throughout eternity.” Louisa finally felt that God had delivered to her what she most wanted, despite her unworthiness.

Her feelings were still suspect, however. She continued, “O, that the sweetness and preciousness of the gift, may not lead me to forget the Giver!” She often worried privately, and sometimes to John, that her feelings for him bordered in idolatry. As she had before her marriage, Louisa strove to ensure that everything she did and felt advanced God’s will and kept Him as the focus. In early June, Louisa confided to her diary that receiving a letter from John made her “almost too happy” – she even forgot the dreadful prospect of leaving her beloved Norfolk.<sup>106</sup> She feared forgetting God even more; Jean Friedman has found that “[f]ear of idolatry, or love of an individual above God, served to check too dependent a marital relation” among evangelicals.<sup>107</sup> Louisa constantly brought herself back to God in diary, consistently connecting Providence to her fortune in finding John. “Can I be sufficiently thankful for having been thought worthy such a heart[,] so elevated by the purest & most honourable sentiments!” she asked herself on one occasion. Repeatedly she implored, “Lord make me worthy of such a blessing.”<sup>108</sup>

While the usual prayers and requests for divine assistance continued in her diary, Louisa’s tone changed. She not longer felt empty and sad but filled her diary each day with expressions of emotional delight and providential blessedness. She now had an immediate goal to animate her: to ready herself for her new responsibilities at Bremono. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, she gushed in her diary, “In the evening my good friend gladdened me with his presence, having been absent two days... His tenderness & kindness impresses my heart most sensibly.” John’s worthiness and esteem continued to inspire Louisa to strive to better herself, making her “feel I should be but too happy in endeavouring to merit his esteem & affection, with which he has honored me.” Louisa would continually return

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<sup>106</sup> LMHC Diary, June 10, 1821

<sup>107</sup> Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 35

<sup>108</sup> LMHC Diary, June 8, 1821

to this new, more specific effort – she sought not only to improve herself as a Christian for the sake of God, but also to improve herself spiritually and socially to be a suitable wife and stepmother.

When the time came for John to return to Brems, Louisa tried to see a benefit in the prospect of separation by reminding herself of her need to improve. “I shall feel his absence but too severely,” she admitted, “but I shall endeavour to improve the time to the best possible account, that of rendering myself more worthy of him.” She adapted her system of accounting for her time spent in Christian charity to preparing herself for mothering and managing the household at Brems. She knew she would need the time, for “when I think of the high responsible station I shall be called to occupy with the many new & untried duties which will devolve upon me, have I not enough to stimulate me to diligence in improving the short space that may be allowed for me to prepare for the great change!”

She recognized that “the great change” was “that event which must influence so materially my future destiny & that perhaps not only for this world but for that which is to come.”<sup>109</sup> Acting as mother to six children and a Christian mistress to over a hundred slaves would be her greatest spiritual challenge and the ultimate opportunity to fulfill her vision of Christian womanhood. She could finally become the ideal woman her beloved Reverend Rice had described, yet she feared she was unready and unworthy of such a vaunted position.

Louisa and John’s mutual attraction had rapidly intensified into a love that found rapturous expression in the letters they exchanged after John left Norfolk at the end of May. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, John was writing Louisa as he traveled towards his plantation. He too expressed concern about idolatry: “Oh my beloved Louisa, you have open’d to my view such an enchanting prospect of earthly happiness, as I fear will confine my thoughts too much to this ‘dim spot which men call Earth[.]’ We must not permit ourselves to carry our anticipations of temporal felicity too far,” he concurred. He was thankful to have

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<sup>109</sup> LMHC Diary, July 14, 1821.

such a pious partner as Louisa, whom “I must mainly rely upon... for assistance.” Both John and Louisa saw in the other a guardian of their spiritual welfare.

John’s vision of his future wife perfectly captures the essence and much of the detail of the companionate ideal. He envisioned emotional fulfillment, household industry, and Christian benevolence. John’s vision was particularly expansive, however, due his unusual views about slavery. Louisa would work not only for the uplift of whites in the community, but also the scores of slaves who labored on John’s plantation.

Long-distance disclosure was necessary to cement and sustain their affection. On May 28, he entreated, “You must not fail to pour out all your heart to me.” An enamored John felt no detail was insignificant: “Let me repeat to you, that you can say nothing but what will be interesting to me.” His usual self-control was failing him, he confessed; he found “it beyond my power to maintain the resolutions I had form’d for the Government of my thought in my absence from you \_ they are constantly returning to you and dwelling upon the anticipation of our final union,” he disclosed to her. Ultimately John embraced his uncharacteristic distraction: “Shall I endeavour to put you away from my thoughts?” he asked rhetorically. “No,” he quipped, “for the wou’d be violating the law, by which we are order’d, to ‘do unto other as we wou’d they shou’d do unto us.’”

John expected Louisa to fulfill the moral and practical responsibilities of wife, mother, and mistress, endowing all of her activities with a spiritual imperative. On June 4<sup>th</sup> he rhapsodized about Louisa’s supposedly natural capacity as a mother. John’s heart swelled “when I place you before my minds eye as the Christian Mother of my bereaved Children.” The ideal Republican Mother, “directing the energies of your cultivated mind & disciplined heart,” Louisa would assure “their intellectual advancement & their moral & religious improvement by [her] superintendence.” Louisa would easily apply her natural religiosity and the benefits of her education and upbringing in “diffusing the benefits of an enlightened & elegant aconomy thro’ all the departments of a large household,” he effused. John neatly compressed the enormous list of tedious tasks

mistresses performed or supervised and their struggle to manage slaves into a concise phrase: enlightened elegant economy.<sup>110</sup>

John entrusted his children's and his own spiritual progress to Louisa. He wrote on July 1<sup>st</sup>, that while she had "been long under the discipline of Christianity and can speak experimentally of your obedience to its holy injunctions[,] I am but in my novitiate." Have late been aroused to the truth of Christianity, John expected guidance from the longer-awakened Louisa. "God can witness for me, that I look to your aid & support in keeping me in the way of truth & salvation as the chief consolation of my future life," he told her, admitting that he had not made faith his priority. "With the deepest consciousness of many & great defects, I can only promise, to endeavour to make myself worthy of a Christian partner of my joys & participater of my sorrows."

The slaves, too, would be uplifted by Louisa's benevolent efforts. "Not confining yourself to" her role as a mother, Louisa would "[extend] your efforts to the amelioration of the condition of the unfortunate race of human beings" who worked the fields at Bremono. John had "often reproached myself\_" for his "neglect, he admitted, and seemed relieved to be able delegate this demanding task. He clearly expected that Louisa, like most "enlightened" plantation mistresses, would accept as her special duty the moral and material welfare of slaves. At Bremono, this meant not only supervising the production of clothing, caring for the sick and injured, and organizing holidays, but also working to Christianize the slaves."<sup>111</sup>

Louisa's position as a mistress was obviously complicated by her commitment to ameliorating slavery. Marli Weiner points out the majority of mistresses sought a compromise between the differences of race and the similarities of gender, and included benevolent treatment of slaves as integral to slaveholding domesticity: "Working closely together in an environment that defined gender differences as almost as significant as

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<sup>110</sup> For a description of mistresses' tasks on large plantation, see Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, ch. 2; Marli Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), ch. 2; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Planatation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), ch. 2.

<sup>111</sup> JHC to LMHC, June 4, 1821

racial ones,” she concludes, “mistresses and slaves were constantly forced to confront both their similarities and their differences.” It could hardly have been otherwise on the majority of plantations, for more people prefer harmony (or the illusion of it) to naked aggression; indeed, the doctrine of paternalism that nurtured women’s benevolent behavior was a system that submerged but did not remove the reality of white access to force.

Recognizing that class as well as race dictated circumstance, John expected that the white “poor of the neighbourhood” would also benefit from Louisa’s pious efforts. She would undertake “Ministry to the temporal wants & awakening to their moral interests,” continuing the round of benevolent visits she was accustomed to in Norfolk. John perhaps overlooked the social aspect of visiting the Asylum, attending meetings of the Female Orphan Society, or distributing Bibles to the country poor. All of these were activities Louisa participated in along with other Christian women, drawing on them for example and affirmation of her sanctification. Alone in the country, benevolent work might seem overwhelming, unappealing, or even intimidating.<sup>112</sup>

“And above all,” at the end of the day – after mothering, managing the household, and ministering to the slaves and neighbors – John expected a share of Louisa’s attention for himself. “[W]hat will prove most fruitful of enjoyment to me,” he admitted, would be “individually receiving daily evidences of your returning with grateful interest all the affection I bestow upon you.” In keeping with the new companionate ideal he was articulating, John expected emotional mutuality as well as household industriousness. “Oh! May I not confidently anticipate the blessings of Heaven upon our Union?” he asked breathlessly. At the same time, John charged his bride-to-be with regulating his feelings. If she should “find my heart & my affections running away with me,” John instructed, “be then my Guardian Angel and remind me” of the importance of placing heavenly love for God above its earthly counterpart.<sup>113</sup> Louisa was envisioned, not merely as the “angel in the household” but as a veritable moral force emanating from within the

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<sup>112</sup> JHC to LMHC, June 4, 1821

<sup>113</sup> John requested this in his letter of May 26, 1821.

household, radiating over the plantation and its environs – the guardian angel of the neighborhood.

Understandably, especially in light of her original concerns, Louisa was apprehensive, and sought to rein in John's expectations. She continued to see herself as she had before: in her letters as in her diary, she constructed herself as helpless and insufficient. While her correspondence reveals the humor, warmth, and common sense that probably made her attractive to John, Louisa continually trivialized or elided the positive attributes she possessed and insisted on her dependence on God and her future husband. Her vision of herself and her marital partnership with John was very different from his. She replied to the above letter on the 11<sup>th</sup>, "The picture you have drawn of your future companion in life, & with which you have paid me the high compliment of associating me, is such an one, as I fear, is but very rarely realized in our fallen world." She continued on this topic at length, telling her "dear," "it will be salutary for you, & very consoling to me, to know you are prepared to content yourself with me in spite of my hundred thousand deficiencies & faults."

Louisa assured John that her insufficiency was not from lack of desire to please him – "Could I make myself just what I would, then I would be exactly & entirely what you would have me but this I know to be utterly impossible[,] every day's experience proves to me my insufficiency of my self, for any good thing." She was even going to visit a friend's farm for "some useful lessons" to prepare her for life on a plantation. Louisa assured John she would be "docile and desirous to learn," but expected she would be "not very apt."<sup>114</sup> She tried to frame her flaws in terms of spirituality – her weakness would be a test of John's Christian patience and resignation. "Solomon says," she reminded him, "'Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, & attaineth favour of the Lord.' From which, I think may fairly be inferred, that not what a man might be disposed to think a good wife, but just such an one as the Lord is pleased to give him, is the best in the world for him." God, in his infinite wisdom, "might see best to give you a peevish, fretful,

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<sup>114</sup> LMH to JHC, June 1, 1821

scolding thing, that would now & then give you a scratch just to put you in remembrance that the bliss of Eden was not intended for you here." True bliss could hardly be expected outside Heaven, she argued, and so John should temper his expectations.

Louisa's letter also implicitly highlights the greater transformations marriage often required of women than from men. In addition to suffering from "an anxiety too painful to be described, at the thought of taking upon myself duties which I am conscious I am altogether unqualified to fulfil [*sic*]," she feared the change of scene. As a wife, she had to follow her husband, joining John in a strange household full of new people and tasks. The thought of leaving Norfolk triggered "the tormenting fear, that I should get immersed in worldly cares" as a mother and plantation mistress. Isolated at Brems, "deprived of many religious advantages, which I have heretofore enjoyed," Louisa was terrified that "I may at last lose all the comforts & consolations of religion."<sup>15</sup>

Louisa's insecurities were not assuaged by John's reassurances and reassertions. In mid-July she masked her anxiety with humor, informing John that while "I am grieved to say or do any thing in the world that is displeasing to you... I don't intend to make you a single promise of amendment." Louisa recognized that even her best effort would be insufficient, "because I fear I shall never be able to equal half the expectations you have already formed of me\_ Poor helpless thing that I am!" She worried that John misunderstood or overestimated her piety. She marveled "That ever you should think I had 'reduced my heart to order by the ascendancy of my Religion!' You should take a peep into it for this last two months. You would too surely see I have been serving something else besides the Creator." Yet again she attempted to correct John's rosy vision of her. She confessed on a few days later, on July 17<sup>th</sup>, "I feel less & less like a heroine as the time [of the wedding] approaches. You must bear with me as well as you can."

Setting the wedding date itself was a source of, not necessarily conflict, but certainly debate between the lovers. John was anxious to return to Norfolk as soon as he

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<sup>15</sup> LMHC to JHC, June 1, 1821

could manage, marry the following day, and leave the next. In response to a scheme he proposed to be wed shortly after July 4<sup>th</sup>, Louisa replied that his plan “flustered me no little. It is so much sooner than I calculated upon, that I really cannot make up my mind to consent to it. Now if [you] should for one moment indulge a suspicion that I am not anxiously desirous to see you, you will do me the greatest injustice to the world. But for many reasons ... I must request your visit may be a few days later. You know we [women] are always allowed to direct this affair, as being the last act in which we are indulged to use our liberty So I have arranged it thus, if you have no very great objection. You shall be down the 4<sup>th</sup> Sabbath in July which is the 22<sup>d</sup>[;] Tuesday the 24<sup>th</sup> I will resign myself to you[;] & Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup> I shall be ready to go wherever you wish me.”

However, Louisa had forgotten she had promised her friend and mentor Reverend Dr. Rice that he would be the one to marry her, and wrote John that “surely people were never in such a dilemma before.” She hastily resolved to try to have both John and the preacher arrive the next day by steam boat, which seemed improbable, or to arrive the following Sunday. “Somewhat to my surprise & confusion,” she confided to her diary the next day, John “arrived in the evening a short time after I had got home, bringing our dear D<sup>r</sup>. R\_ with him.” Everything was “arranged before he left me, for our nuptials to be solemnized[?] at 10 o’clock on the following day.”

The impromptu ceremony went off well, despite Louisa’s fears; she recorded the next day: “After friends being assembled, I was united to Gen. C\_ at 10 this morning. Every thing conspired to encourage & support me under this trying event.” Despite the hastiness of the arrangements, the “presence of our dear D<sup>r</sup>. R\_ & many dear relations & friends, the comparative composure of dear brother & mother, & above all the high degree of confidence I felt in the object of my choice, united to keep me calm & cheerful, tho’ with the near prospect of being separated from all that had been so long dear to me.” Evidently William and Helen had resigned themselves to losing Louisa as she had readied herself to leave them; perhaps William even consented to give her away.

The next day, Louisa was “called to the painful task of parting from my dear mother brother & other friends but how should I praise my Heavenly Father for all that comfort & consolation which was so abundantly afforded me!” They traveled first to Mount Pleasant, John’s brother-in-law’s plantation in Surry, and continued visiting friends and relative along the way.<sup>116</sup> It was not until the second of August that she “I had the pleasure of seeing Bremo the Seat of my dear, where I am[?] to commence the duties of so many & new relations.”

Despite her fears of rejection and embarrassment, her six stepchildren greeted her cordially. “What sensations filled my breast as I folded the dear little children to [my] heart,” she happily told her diary. “May God make me in any degree useful to them. I was most kindly & affectionately recd. by all the household [the children, overseers, and 178 slaves], & felt that I could not be grateful enough for all the goodness of my Heavenly Father.” Louisa was feeling positive. “I find every thing that I could reasonably desire to make me happy,” she wrote, enumerating her blessings. She had “the kindest & best of Friends [John], dutiful & affectionate children, good & faithful servants, a spacious dwelling, with one of the finest prospects imaginable,” overlooking the James River.<sup>117</sup> She and John were confident of their future happiness, rearing his children in an environment of Christian benevolence and performing good works for the slaves and local whites. As they settled in for their first night together at Bremo, both felt confident they had successfully chosen the ideal companion. Sadly, their tranquility was short-lived.

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<sup>116</sup> LHMHC Diary, July 20, 1821; see also entries for July 22, 24, 25, 28, 30, 31, August 1, 1821. On the slave population, see Coyner, 86-87.

<sup>117</sup> LHMHC Diary, August 2, 1821.

**Conclusion: “I am becoming better contented with home scenes and home duties” – Ideal & Reality in the Cockes’ Marriage, 1821-1843**

Louisa recorded the above observation in her diary at the end of December 1836.<sup>118</sup> John’s vision of her effortlessly “diffusing the benefits of an enlightened & elegant economy thro’ all the departments of a large household” had, as she had feared, proved too lofty. After fifteen years of marriage, she had finally accepted Bremsley as home, but continued to wrestle with her feelings of loss, isolation, and resentment. She was still plagued by a sense of failure. Before she met John, she felt insufficient because she was unable to become a wife; since they had wed, she lamented she was unable to *be* the ideal wife.

Shortly after she arrived, Louisa began to realize the enormous sacrifice she had made in leaving Norfolk. She queried in her diary on July 28<sup>th</sup>, “Why should it be so, that I must leave all these, my dear friend?” She quickly reminded herself of her great gain: “But then I thought of my very dear husband, & felt how ungrateful I should be to indulge in murmuring thoughts.”<sup>119</sup> Her efforts to make new friends were impeded by the demands of her time, the distance between residences, and the “dearth of subjects which the country affords.”<sup>120</sup> The few closed friends she maintained or made were only able to visit for brief, happy periods because of their own domestic obligations.

Louisa herself was largely occupied by household duties, but found little satisfaction in them. Even after she mastered the plantation routine, she performed it joylessly. “To be tied down to this barren place,” she complained when she once again had to decline an offer to visit friends, “is most trying.”<sup>121</sup> When a “delightful tour to Niagara & the lakes” was canceled due to a cholera outbreak, she sighed that they “must drudge through the same scenes as formers ones.”<sup>122</sup> She dreaded the role of hostess, always breathing a sigh of relief when John’s friends and business partners departed.

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<sup>118</sup> LMHC Diary, December 28, 1836.

<sup>119</sup> LMHC Diary, July 28, 1821.

<sup>120</sup> LMHC Diary, December 12, 1822.

<sup>121</sup> LMHC Diary, July 28, 1833.

<sup>122</sup> LMHC Diary, June 23, 1832.

Much as she lamented her isolation, she detested worldly company and the demands of hospitality more.

The tedium and isolated was exacerbated by the lack of regular services in the country. The multi-denominational meeting house John built in 1828 was more than twelve miles away, and she was often prevented from attending due to heat, rain, or John's disinterest or disapproval. Louisa lamented the many "silent Sabbaths" she spent alone with her Bible. John proved less interested in his personal religion than she had hoped; his children were already too old to be much influenced by her and clung to their governess. He frequently spent his Sundays organizing secular reforms, and to Louisa's horror, the services he preferred were camp meetings, characterized in her mind by "illiterate preaching, false doctrine, and noisy worship."<sup>123</sup>

Despite his disappointing lack of personal observance, John collaborated with Louisa on a major benevolent work, the task of Christianizing his slaves. John built a slave chapel in 1826, and Louisa diligently led a Sunday school, as she had done in Norfolk. Louisa urged him to create an "Infant School" as well, and helped him to select and supervise the Northern teachers. Both envisioned educating and enlightening their "dependents" and returning them to Africa. Although their efforts yielded few conversions and fewer colonists, it gave them a vital mutual interest for many years. While John hired and fired the teachers and preachers, Louisa poured her energy into teaching slave children to read and write and inculcating basic Christian principles. It was her major source of satisfaction, her "best opportunity to serve my Redeemer."<sup>124</sup> As Urbach points out, the schools were largely for Louisa's benefit; they garnered few committed converts. "The slaves' needs, ill-defined," Urbach notes, "were always secondary" to Louisa's more abstract ideals and personal goals.<sup>125</sup>

Despite their common goals, John and Louisa's marriage was characterized by friction and resentment. John traveled frequently with little consideration for Louisa's

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<sup>123</sup> LMHC Dairy, July 29, 1830.

<sup>124</sup> LMHC Dairy, May 24, 1834.

<sup>125</sup> Urbach, "God and Man," 451.

loneliness, usually insisting she stay at home to manage domestic affairs. To assuage her lonesomeness, Louisa wrote him frequently and at length. Urbach describes her missives as “eager but awkward and apologetic in their attempts at intimacy.”<sup>126</sup> She listed the myriad annoyances and problems his absence caused her, confessed her concerns about the children and slaves, entreated him to return as soon as possible, and begged him to reply. Their intimacy, largely forged through letters after a brief acquaintance, required continued effort to maintain and enlarge – an effort John was increasingly too busy for and in which he was less and less interested.

As tiresome as Louisa’s neediness was, John, a sharp and stern individual, found her frequent temper more trying. Louisa wrestled mightily with anger, that most unfeminine of traits. Often she lost, finding herself speaking back to John, whose rebuke would send her to her room in tears. Despite her best efforts, Louisa had to confess that wifely submission “was so foreign from my natural disposition.”<sup>127</sup> She was also constantly frustrated by the slaves, finding fault with their tasks, venting her ire on whomever appeared to be the cause of her annoyance. She inevitably regretted her rashness and usually apologized to whomever she had snapped.

Louisa was often vexed by John’s disregard of her religious commitment. More trying than his absence was John’s growing distrust of Louisa’s faith, which Urbach argues he saw as in conflict with her loyalty to him as her husband. He frequently demanded she stay home from service for trifling reasons and forbid her to attend the Synods and meetings she so enjoyed before her marriage. After one especially bad argument, Louisa asked God in anguish, “why am I tried in my desire to worship thee in that mode which my heart and conscience most approve?”<sup>128</sup>

Despite their attempts to forge a lasting, workable intimacy throughout their courtship, Louisa and John came into conflict over some of the things they thought unproblematic: emotional mutuality and religious faith. Louisa’s vision of a close

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<sup>126</sup> Urbach, “God and Man,” 178

<sup>127</sup> LMHC, October 16, 1832

<sup>128</sup> LMHC, November 14, 1841; Urbach, “God and Man,” 158-164

relationship characterized by mutual spiritual and emotional dependence was thwarted by John's disinclination to worship, his frequent travels, and his circumscription of her social world. John, too, was disappointed in his hopes for a cheerful help-meet to help raise his children and smoothly manage the household. Louisa's plea for leniency in the face of his lofty ideal went unheeded. Each misunderstood the other's needs and desires, despite drawing on a similar vocabulary of sentiment and Christianity. Louisa clung to an older vision of marriage characterized by male spiritual and moral authority that more often necessitated men's presence in the home. John, on the other hand, embraced entirely the new vision of female moral authority and growing domestic autonomy, which he saw as vital to his management of his many interests.

The unhappy outcome of the Cockes' marriage suggests the hazards that companionate marriage offered, in counterpoint to its oft-discussed boons. When historians take individual experience, religious persuasion, and issues of rhetorical versus material power into consideration, we begin to see the jagged edges of this transitional phases, where new ideals and older expectations overlap and conflict. While the elevation of women's moral authority and the growing emphasis on emotion offered avenues of empowerment and fulfillment, the unexplored terrain was also littered with pitfalls. As Louisa realized, women's near-total dependency on husbands meant that the growing expectations for marriage could also mean greater disappointments.

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**Vita**

Lindsay originally hails from beautiful central Pennsylvania. She attended the Pennsylvania State University, earning two bachelors degrees with interdisciplinary honors in History and Women's Studies. She decided to venture a bit further afield for her graduate work and has been delighted with her choice of institution. Not only has graduate school been a delightful and inspiring, rather than soul-crushing, challenge – there's no snow to speak of! She anticipates expanding her master's research into a dissertation that will be better able to more fully address the questions she raises here and offers more conclusive insights about the development of companionate marriage and its ramifications.