

LETITIA PRESTON FLOYD--PIONEER CATHOLIC FEMINIST

by Harry E. Winter O.M.I.

When Alexis de Tocqueville was finishing Democracy in America, about 1835, he asked what was "the chief cause of the extraordinary prosperity and growing power of this nation"? And he wrote succinctly: "the superiority of their women."

Recently, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, which covers the entire state of West Virginia, decided to honor one of these women, the author and educator Letitia Preston Floyd (1779-1852). She was to the manor born, with her brother, James Patton Preston serving as the governor of Virginia from 1816-19; her husband, John Floyd Jr., from 1830-34; and her son, John Buchanan Floyd, from 1848-52. However, the manor was not in slave-holding and aristocratic Tidewater Virginia, but in the anti-slavery and populist Appalachian Mountains, near what is now Blacksburg, Virginia. Her childhood home, Smithfield Plantation, borders on the large land grant university Virginia Polytechnical Institute and State University (VPISU), commonly called Virginia Tech. Smithfield was in the Preston family for five generations, ~~was~~<sup>and</sup> was deeded in 1959 to the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. Beautifully restored, and open to the public, it gives a good insight into what it was to grow up on the frontier, in a powerful, landed family.

Mrs. Floyd herself, with terse and polished prose, described her childhood at Smithfield in a long letter (or perhaps a short history) of Feb. 22, 1843 to her son Benjamin Rush Floyd. She wrote

lovingly about the books her father had arranged to be purchased in London. "A good selection of the classics, ancient history, the distinguished poets of England, the Dictionary of Arts and Sciences, a sort of encyclopedia, with much polemics and many religious productions, constituted the libraries." And then she summed up her view of the importance of education on the frontier: "the use of these books gave to each family possessing them a station which outranked many wealthier families."

Letitia's father was the surveyor for much of central and western Virginia. He employed several deputies, and Letitia wrote that every young man whom he employed had to teach school for him "six months at least, thereby finding out his temper, diligence, <sup>small, better-in-law</sup> habits and trustworthiness." One such man was Colonel John Floyd Sr.; in 1804, Letitia married his son, John Floyd Jr. (1783-1837). <sup>called by Indian</sup>

Trained in both law and medicine, John Floyd Jr. was soon serving in the U.S. House of Representatives (1817-29). A grandfather and great grandfather had been governors of Virginia. A brother had been a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition; John tirelessly pushed for the occupation of the Oregon area, both during and after his service in Congress. In 1830 he became the last governor of Virginia to serve under its pre-Revolutionary War constitution; then, the first to serve under the post-Revolutionary War constitution. In the national election of 1832 he received the eleven electoral votes of South Carolina for president of the U.S.A.

It was during his governorship that their children started becoming Catholic, and therein lies a mystery. What led the family to become Catholic in a time when Catholicism was a very suspect religion?

Two people were certainly involved. The first was the very personable pastor of St. Peter's Church, Richmond, Father Timothy O'Brien. Gov. Floyd maintained a pew at St. Peter's during his term of office. The three daughters began to convert at this time, during their teens; three of the four sons eventually became Catholic. Undoubtedly, the sermons they heard from their pew helped. In fact, on May 27, 1832, their father recorded in his journal: "went to the chapel to hear Mr. O'Brien, who is a man of talents and a respectable orator."

The second person involved was Bishop Richard Whelan, second bishop of Richmond and first bishop of Wheeling. His views on slavery, and that of Gov. Floyd's, were remarkably similar: they wanted to stamp it out. Gov. Floyd wrote in his journal on Dec. 26, 1831: "I shall not rest until slavery is abolished in Virginia." (The Nat Turner slave rebellion, which Floyd had to subdue, must have been a tragic time for the whole family). Slavery affected Bishop Whelan no less seriously. One of the main reasons why he left Richmond altogether for Wheeling was his hatred of and opposition to slavery.

So two clergymen undoubtedly influenced the Floyd family. But it is quite certain that the teenage girls could never have joined the Catholic Church without the permission of their mother.

Gov. Floyd had never enjoyed robust health. Mrs. Floyd's sister Mary had married John Lewis, a part owner of the famous resort Sweet Springs. The powerful families of the day summered for several weeks at each of six resorts; a modern historian notes "one HAD to be at the Sweet for the last week in August and the first week in September.

It was like the salmon, who knew when it was time to go back up the Columbia River" (Fishwick, Springlore in Virginia). John Floyd died suddenly at his ~~sister-in-law's~~ <sup>DAUGHTER'S</sup> home, Lynnside, just outside the village of Sweet Springs, Va. (now W.V.) on August 21, 1837. He was only 54 years old.

Local historians assert that John Floyd was received into the Catholic Church on his deathbed, but no records have ever been found. So the reports have never been accepted by Diocese of Richmond authorities.

The oldest daughter, also named Letitia, had become the third wife of widower William Lynn Lewis, John Lewis' son, in a Catholic marriage on March 13, 1837. They were first cousins, and some 15 years different in age. Letitia Lewis now became mistress of the estate of Lynnside, some five months before her father's death. They buried her father in the Lewis Family Cemetery, at the Lynnside estate where they had spent so many happy summers. Letitia Lewis set about building a chapel for local Catholics, and securing the services of a priest. The chapel, St. John's, Sweet Springs, stands to this day and is the oldest Catholic Church in W.V. to be preserved in its original form. Bishops, archbishops, and probably even Cardinal Gibbons beat a path to Sweet Springs to stay with the powerful Lewis/Floyd family and celebrate Mass at St. John's.

Letitia Floyd directed the affairs of her family from an estate high in the Appalachians, at Burkes Garden, Virginia. She certainly spent many summers in Sweet Springs, at her sister's and daughter's estate. And she wrote thousands of letters.

Her lengthy correspondence with Bishop Whelan is probably preserved among ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> papers of the Floyd and Preston families in the several archives and state libraries. No one has yet edited the

letters and written the definitive biography of this Christian feminist. But four of the letters from Bishop Whelan to her are available in the archives of the Diocese of Richmond; the one of May 8, 1845 is especially revealing. Bishop Whelan had lost patience with her, and used every argument to help her make up her mind. "I feel sure that your intelligent and well informed mind will scarce allow you to admit any resting place between Catholicity and infidelity; I feel equally sure that Christianity carries with it too many evidences of truth to allow you to stake your everlasting hopes upon its rejection." He wanted her to consider the influence of her example; he felt that many had attempted before God to excuse or lessen their own neglect by her example. He concluded these and other arguments by warning her "it is now, my dear friend, the 11th hour for you, and you still have it in your power to repair much of the past, . . . by acknowledging before men that Saviour whom you wish to acknowledge you before his Father in heaven." He wrote that it would be a great consolation to him on his approaching visit to receive her and two others he named into the Catholic faith.

Mrs. Floyd put off the final decision for seven more years, not being received into the Church by Bishop Whelan until June, 1852. She died on Dec. 12 of the same year. The pastor of Wytheville, Va., her sons and sons-in-law accompanied her body the 80 miles from Burkes Garden to Sweet Springs. A beautiful journey over mauntains and straams in good weather, it would have been a torturous one in bad. They buried her next to her husband in the Lewis Family Cemetery on the knoll with the exquisite view behind her daughter's house.

If one reads the historians of frontier religion, particularly Methodist historians, one can perhaps understand why it took Mrs. Floyd so long to join an organized religion. One of the signs of fervor during revivals was the amount of barking one could do. Religion in the Appalachians, even up to Civil War times, was very messy and chaotic. The slavery issue affected all churches with great bitterness. It is perhaps to her credit that she allowed her children to join as they approached their late teens, but took much more time for her intellect to accept the reasonableness of the Latin language and other externals of Catholicism at that time.

On January 24, 1821, <sup>Mrs.</sup> ~~Mrs.~~ Floyd witnessed the death of her brother William. She had to write William's wife the sad news. "He <sup>died</sup> ~~lived~~ as he lived, satisfied with the justice and goodness of his Creator." Devout but not saccharine, she then added "A friend to all honest men and the foe of scoundrels." Signing the letter to her sister-in-law "Your afflicted Sister," Mrs. Floyd expressed the belief: "Oh my Sister what a shield and stay his precious family have lost. I hope God will enable them to bear this sad bereavement." She may not have been quick to join any organized religion, but she was deeply religious.

Gov. Floyd's grave had been marked with a handsome dressed concrete slab some three feet long, six feet wide and ten inches thick.

JOHN FLOYD  
TWICE GOVERNOR OF  
VIRGINIA  
AN APOSTLE OF SECESSION  
AND THE FATHER OF  
THE OREGON COUNTRY  
DIED AUG. 21, 1837

After discussion with LETITIA PRESTON FLOYD  
Mrs. Floyd's direct WIFE OF GOVERNOR JOHN FLOYD JR  
descendant, Mrs. Jack MOTHER OF GOV. JOHN BUCHANAN FLOYD  
(Lynn) Spellman, who AUTHOR AND EDUCATOR  
maintains the Lewis Family Cemetery, this DIED DEC. 12, 1852  
text was agreed for Mrs. Floyd:

But a major problem would be to find Mrs. Floyd's grave, for it had been unmarked, with only the understanding that she was buried "next to her husband."

An archaeologist trained in restoring cemeteries had been hired to recover the graves of many early Irish settlers buried in the adjacent Old Catholic Cemetery. Professor Ken Robinson, of Lillington, N.C. spent the weeks of Sept. 26, 1988 and June 11, 1990 restoring both cemeteries and locating the grave of Mrs. Floyd. It was fascinating to watch him and his helpers as they determined the grave areas.

No attempt was made to excavate or exhume any human remains. Rarely did the excavations extend any deeper than 10 inches. Prof. Robinson's report described the process:

Detection of grave pits was accomplished by stripping away ground vegetation and topsoil to expose changes in soil color and texture. Grave pits were usually visible as areas of mottled orange, yellow and brown earth, which results from the mixing of the various colors of clays and silts that were used to refill the grave at the time of burial. The edges of the grave pits were sometimes distinctly visible due to the contrast between the grave fill and natural subsoil.

Excavations were conducted mostly with hand tools such as shovels, mattocks and trowels. Excavation areas were marked prior to the excavation and the precise locations of the excavated areas were mapped and recorded in order to maintain permanent record of where the excavations were conducted.

Since the massive concrete marker to Gov. Floyd was only placed on his grave in the 1930's, some hundred years after his death, it was deemed prudent to see if the marker actually covered his grave. Intensive investigation determined that it was off center by at least two feet. The concrete slab, and a large concrete box supporting it, were both moved 4 feet west and 2 feet north of the original location, since both historical evidence and soil analysis and probing indicated

that was where the governor's grave was, with an identically matching grave on its south side. This unmarked grave gave every indication of being Letitia Preston Floyd's grave. So the new marker was placed on it, and the Most Rev. Bernard W. Schmitt, seventh bishop of Wheeling, was invited to bless it and celebrate the occasion.

On August 15, 1990, direct descendants of Mrs. Floyd from Virginia and West Virginia joined Bishop Schmitt first in the chapel of St. John and then at the newly marked grave itself, to celebrate the memory of this great Christian feminist. A Roanoke, Va. TV station gave the church service extensive coverage. A van brought officials of the Montgomery County Branch of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, and other interested people from Smithfield Plantation, Letitia's childhood home about 75 miles across the border in Blacksburg, Virginia.

At the grave, Professor Robinson explained how he had operated. Bishop Schmitt blessed the new marker, standing where his predecessor, the first bishop of Wheeling, Richard Whelan had stood when he visited the grave site on October 19, 1859. Even today, the drive from Wheeling is over five hours. Then, the coach ride must have taken at least a week. Bishop Whelan had come to preside at the marriage of one of Mrs. Floyd's granddaughter's, and would not have missed the opportunity to pray at his famous convert's grave.

Did de Tocqueville ever meet this feminist, who embodied his praise of American women? The Floyd's are not listed among the people he interviewed during his 1832 trip up the coast from New Orleans to Washington, D.C. But he almost certainly heard of her. His very poor impression of interviewing Andrew Jackson coincides remarkably



with the opposition which Governor and Mrs. Floyd showed to President Jackson. Being four years older than her husband, and in much better health, she undoubtedly formed a strong partnership of mind and heart and action with John Floyd.

One speaker at the service in the chapel mused that when he first started reading about Mrs. Floyd, he was tempted to call her "the Abigail Adams of Virginia." Then, as he read more, he began to wonder if someday, when Mrs. Floyd's letters are edited and a definitive biography written, we might not be calling Abigail Adams "the Letitia Preston Floyd of New England":

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